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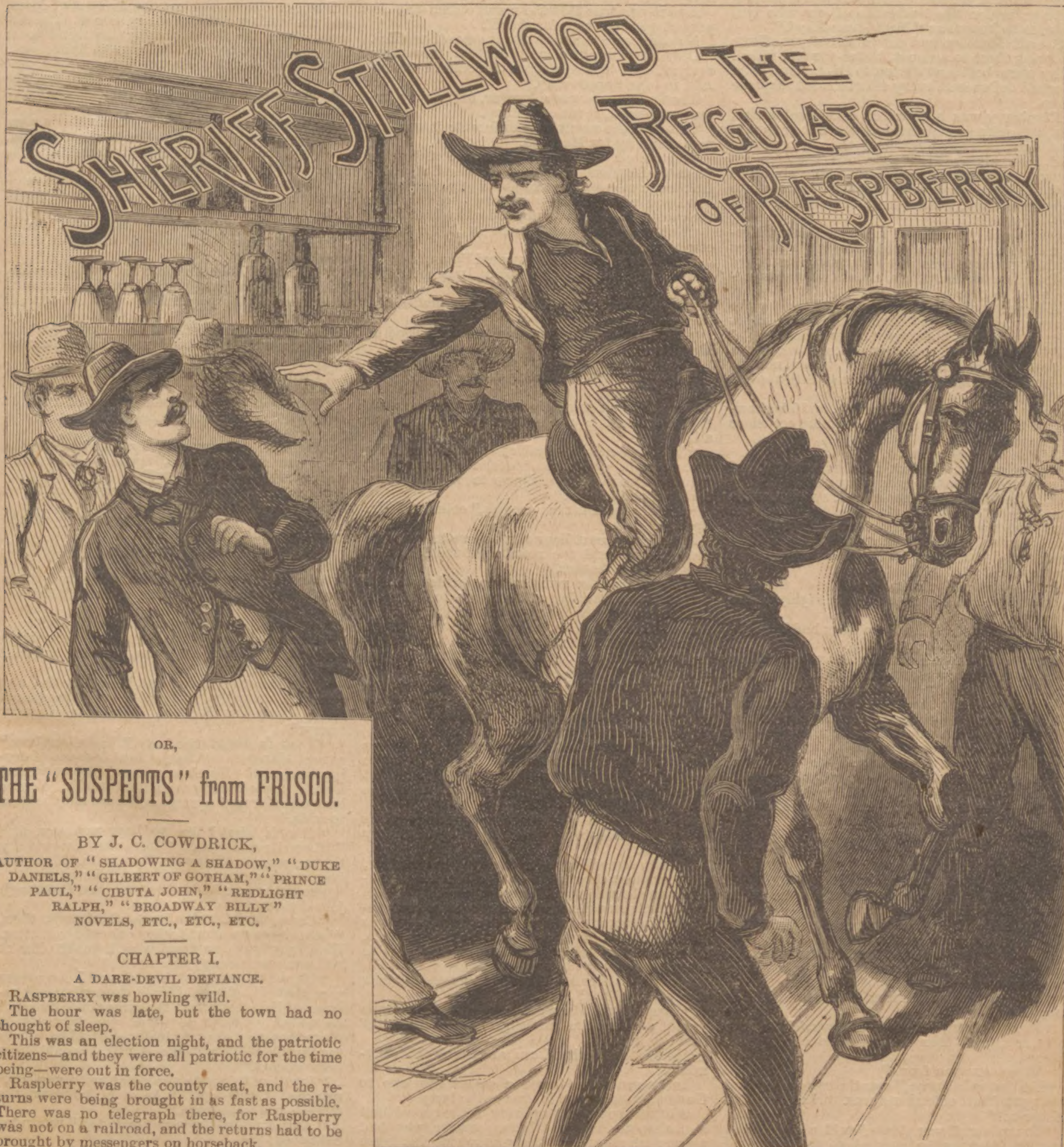
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OR,

THE "SUSPECTS" from FRISCO.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "SHADOWING A SHADOW," "DUKE
DANIELS," "GILBERT OF GOTHAM," "PRINCE
PAUL," "CIBUTA JOHN," "REDLIGHT
RALPH," "BROADWAY BILLY"
NOVELS, ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DARE-DEVIL DEFIANCE.

RASPBERRY was howling wild.
The hour was late, but the town had no
thought of sleep.
This was an election night, and the patriotic
citizens—and they were all patriotic for the time
being—were out in force.
Raspberry was the county seat, and the re-
turns were being brought in as fast as possible.
There was no telegraph there, for Raspberry
was not on a railroad, and the returns had to be
brought by messengers on horseback.
Every fresh arrival brought out renewed
cheering from both parties, but when the mes-

"HERE'S THE COMPLIMENTS, SHERIFF, OF [SNATCHING OFF THE BUSHY RED BEARD AND
FLINGING IT IN STILLWOOD'S FACE] NIGHT-TIME NIGEL, THE OUTLAW KING!"

senger had given his report of the ballot in the township from which he hailed, then the cheering became one-sided. And it was now growing more and more one-sided, as the night advanced and the end was coming.

The great issue in Raspberry county lay between the rival candidates for the office of sheriff.

On one ticket was Giles Marsdon, who was running for re-election, having filled the office one term, and on the other was John Stillwood.

Stillwood was a man of thirty-four. He was tall and well made, with dark hair and eyes and a beardless face.

Marsdon was older, being well on toward fifty.

These two men were not unfriendly, though their opinions differed politically, and they were now opponents for the same office.

It looked as though Stillwood would win. He had polled a big vote in Raspberry township, and a strong majority in some others, but Marsdon had pushed him hard in others where he was well known.

As the night advanced, however, and the outlying districts were being heard from, Stillwood was again creeping ahead, and, as stated, it looked as though he would win.

Marsdon was much liked, but recent events had shown that he was not just the man for the place.

At any rate, so thought the supporters of Stillwood.

For some time past this quarter of the State had been under a reign of terror, owing to the frequent and daring depredations of a band of outlaws under the leadership of one who had come to be known as "Night-time Nigel."

Sheriff Marsdon had put forth his best efforts to bring them to account, but so far had failed. They were bold and daring to the extreme, and laughed defiance at every effort made to capture them.

Raspberry was a town of considerable size, and had quite a population. For a long time it had escaped the attention of the outlaws, who had been plying their nefarious vocation all around, and the citizens had begun to think that the Nigel gang were afraid to venture into so large a place; but suddenly they were brought to their senses.

One night the office of the Consolidated Mining Company was entered, the big safe was skillfully broken open and a large sum in money and bullion stolen. This, about two weeks previous to the time of our story.

A big reward was immediately offered by the company, and renewed efforts were made to get hold of the band, but they were fruitless.

All this had led the citizens to think that a change in the office of sheriff would not be amiss, since they had a man like Stillwood to fill the place.

His "caliber" was well known, and his prowess had been put to the test on more occasions than one.

And so the matter stood.

It was now one o'clock in the morning, and the town, to repeat, was howling wild.

All the bars had been closed, strictly, up to the hour of seven in the evening, but since that time they had done a rushing business, and everybody who drank at all had seemingly been trying to make up for the day's forced abstinence.

In consequence, about two-fifths of the male population of the place were in a highly hilarious condition.

The polling-place at Raspberry had been the bar-room of Josh Hubbard's Hotel.

This hotel, the "Seven Stars," was the finest and best in the town, and here the leading politicians of the county were congregated.

Bets were being made, as to the final result when the remaining six or eight townships were heard from, and it was noticeable that the odds against Marsdon were creeping up.

"Your chances is beginnin' ter look slim, sheriff," observed old Hubbard, as a chance offered.

"Yes, I see they are," Marsdon agreed, "but it can't be helped."

"You won't kick, eh?"

"Not a kick! If Stillwood gits it, why I'll holler with th' crowd, that's all."

"That's white of ye, anyhow."

Just then another great shout was heard in the street.

"Hello!" exclaimed Lawrence Guydon, "this must be another messenger!"

The shouting became louder, the thud of hoofs was heard, and, a moment later, a horseman drew rein at the steps of the porch.

"How has it gone, citizens?" he demanded, as he sprang down.

"It looks straight for Stillwood," he was informed; and then followed the eager question:

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Gahanna," was the response, "and I've got th' full official returns. Who am I to deliver to?"

"To me, sir, if you please," said a short, slim man in black, as he stepped to the front; "I am the person authorized to receive them."

No one objecting, the messenger handed the

papers over to him, and the result was soon made known.

It was twenty more for Stillwood.

"But, what is it for Member of Assembly, Mr. Spangle?" eagerly inquired Guydon. *That* was where his interest lay.

"It is the same," Spangle returned.

"Then Oakbough is twenty more ahead of me?"

"Exactly."

"But there are seven towns to be heard from yet, Mr. Guydon," spoke up Francis Oakbough.

"And so much the worse for me, I'm afraid," growled Guydon. "This infernal insane interest in the beggarly office of sheriff is ruining everything else. Pity the confounded thing hadn't been on a ticket by itself."

"Yes, I wish it had, too," agreed Oakbough, with something of significance in his tone.

"Why, do you think you would have run any better?"

"It would have saved us both from all thought of being carried into office on the strength of the vote for sheriff, or of defeat from the same cause."

Lawrence Guydon was a man of fifty. He was general manager for the Consolidated Mining Company, at Raspberry.

Francis Oakbough was younger, being about thirty-two. He was a well-made man, good-looking, and well liked. He held the position of cashier of the Raspberry National Bank.

The two were, as has been shown, rivals for the office of Member of Assembly, and it looked as though Oakbough would carry off the banner.

And it was true that the result either way depended upon the vote for sheriff.

No one seemed anxious about any other office.

Only a few minutes later another messenger arrived, and Spangle again announced the result, in his pompous way.

Martin Spangle was a lawyer, and a very important person, in his own mind.

This time the result was different; it was sixteen majority for Marsdon.

This raised another wild whoop from the Marsdon-Guydon party, and the Stillwood-Oakbough men were correspondingly dejected.

"Dang me if I know which side of th' fence the rooster is goin' ter jump," declared old Josh.

"But, the Assembly—what is it for that?" eagerly cried Guydon.

"It is the same, sir," answered Spangle.

"Well, that is good, anyhow. It is better to be ahead than behind."

"But, you are not ahead yet," reminded one of the Stillwood supporters.

"No, but a few more like that will send us ahead, hey, Marsdon?"

"That's what it will," the sheriff agreed.

"And how will that suit you, Mr. Stillwood?" inquired Josh.

"Oh, I shan't complain," Stillwood responded.

"If the result is against me, so be it, that's all."

"There is a good deal of squirm in our dog yet, though, gentlemen," declared Oakbough, "and you've got a neat figure to wipe out before you will lead us."

"All of which is true enough," coincided Mr. Spangle.

During the next hour three more towns were heard from, and the results put the Stillwood party in high feather.

Only three now remained to decide the matter, and it was hoping against hope to look for them to change the foregone conclusion.

And finally, at three o'clock, only one more was out, and it was only one chance in ten thousand that that one could turn the tide, and yet it might.

Rixford township, the forlorn hope of the Guydon-Marsdon party, had a good many voters, and if they could only secure two-thirds of them, clear, their election was assured.

It was known that the messenger from there was likely to get a late start, and that, taken together with the fact that he had further to come than any other, had put him among the latest looked-for.

But now he was long over-due, and the anxious crowd at Raspberry was growing decidedly impatient.

At last, something after three in the morning, another great shout arose, and a horseman dashed down the valley and into the town.

He made straight for the Seven Stars, but, instead of stopping at the steps of the porch, as the others had done, he urged his horse up them, and the crowd falling back out of the way, he rode right into the bar-room.

"Hello, feller neighbors," he greeted, "how stands th' ballot?"

"That is what we are eager to learn from you, if you are the messenger from Rixford," said Guydon.

"Well, that's what I am, and here's th' dockymints."

As he spoke he tossed a sealed envelope to Guydon, who turned it over to the lawyer.

While Spangle was opening it, the crowd had a chance to observe the messenger who had taken such a daring liberty as to ride his horse into the room.

He was a man of uncertain age, with a great

tangle of red beard around his face and a big slouch hat on his head.

He had plenty of room allowed him, for his horse was uneasy and was constantly moving, and was now headed toward the door and apparently eager to dash out. As this was looked for at any instant, the way was carefully clear.

"What is it? What is it, Spangle?" was the eager demand on all hands.

"Sixty majority for Stillwood," was the announcement, and a great shout went up from that party immediately.

"Sheriff Stillwood," cried the man on the horse, "allow me to congratulate you. I wish you big prosperity and a long life, but the latter you are not likely to attain if you make yourself too busy about my business. Here's the compliments, sheriff, of [snatching off the bushy red beard and flinging it in Stillwood's face, and at the same time dashing for the door] Night-time Nigel, the Outlaw King?"

CHAPTER II.

ROBBERY AND MURDER.

For a moment silence reigned; no one moved or spoke, or seemed able to. The whole affair was something so unlooked-for that the effect was paralyzing.

Had they heard aright? Was this really Nigel the Outlaw? If so, how had he come into possession of the returns from Rixford?

Sheriff-elect Stillwood was the first to recover from the effect of the surprise, and snatching a magnificent five-shooter from his hip pocket he sprang so the door, shouting:

"Come, boys, don't let him escape!"

Three or four strides carried him out of doors, and the outlaw could be dimly seen at some distance down the street, putting his horse to its best pace to get beyond the range of flying lead.

Stillwood emptied his revolver at him, but without effect, so far as could be seen, and the only response was a laugh of defiance from the outlaw.

In another moment a score of revolvers were barking, but now it was useless to shoot at him.

"Well, that beats all," Stillwood muttered, as he returned to the bar-room.

"It was a cool piece of business, and no mistake," averred Oakbough, who had followed out.

"Didn't wing him, did ye?" asked old Josh.

"Didn't touch him, I guess," answered Stillwood.

"That is th' kind of man he is," said Marsdon. "He has been raising merry thunder all around us, and now it looks as if Raspberry has come in for it, too."

"Your first business will be to cut short his career, Sheriff Stillwood," remarked Lawrence Guydon.

"I will make no boasts of what I will do," responded Stillwood.

"You will give yourself plenty of room to drop, eh?" observed Lancelot Guydon, Lawrence's son.

"Perhaps. At any rate, I am no boaster."

"By the way, Spangle," spoke up Lawrence, "are those papers genuine?"

"Yes, sir, they are genuine enough, so far as I can see," the lawyer assured.

"Then this outlaw must have stopped the messenger and robbed him."

"That is th' way it looks," chimed in the landlord.

"And the Assembly—what is the report on that?" Guydon asked, with a last flicker of hope.

"It is sixty majority for Oakbough, sir."

"Curse the luck!" the disappointed candidate growled. "This is all owing to this infernal sheriff craze!"

"And we are counted out," Guydon the son observed, dismally. "I guess my little speech down there at Rixford didn't weigh very heavy."

"That is about the way it looks, anyhow," agreed Marsdon. "But, what is the use of crying about it? Here's my hand, Stillwood, and I wish you all success in the world. You've beat me, fair and square, and I am not the man to kick."

"That is what I like to hear you say, sir," Stillwood responded. "It is what I would say to you, were it otherwise than it is. This has been a fair game, and luck has favored me."

The two shook hands heartily, and Oakbough joined them and did the same.

"Come, Mr. Guydon," said Oakbough, then, "let us have no hard feelings about the matter. Here's my hand, as frankly as I would offer it had you won the day."

"I'll shake hands with you, and I can assure you that I hold no ill-will toward you," responded Guydon. "At the same time, though," he added, "I must say that you have won a place that you are not justly entitled to. Only for this blind folly over a sheriff, I would have been elected."

"I will not dispute the point with you, sir," returned Oakbough. "As it is, however, the office seems to be mine."

"And it must be our treat, too," reminded Stillwood.

"Yes, so it is."

"Throw open your bar, free, Josh, for the

next half hour," Stillwood directed, "and I'll settle the score."

"No, I'll settle," cried Oakbough.

"Well, we'll both stand responsible, then," amended Stillwood.

So it was arranged, and old Josh soon found himself pretty busy.

The long suspense over, the victorious party let itself loose, and the rest of the night was made uproarious with their jubilation.

A great fire was made in the street in front of the hotel, the blaze making the scene as light as day, and around that the hilarious crowd danced and pranced, all shouting, singing, beating tin pans, blowing horns, and so forth.

To sleep, with such a din going on, was impossible, and at daylight those who had gone to bed at all came out again.

Shortly after daylight, when the noise had subsided a little, a tired-looking stranger ambled into town, and made his way to the Seven Stars. On entering the bar-room some one recognized him.

"Hello!" that person exclaimed, "here's Ned Bradley, from Rixford!"

"Here's all that's left of me, anyhow," the stranger owned.

"What's happened ye?"

"Well, I set out ter bring in th' returns from Rixford, but I got held up by Night-time Nigel. He took all I had, even to my hoss. I kin tell ye about how it went over our way, but you'll have ter wait fer th' real facts and figgers till I kin go back and bring another copy."

"Oh! we've got the returns all right," he was told.

"Got the returns? How did ye git 'em?"

"Nigel himself brought 'em in."

"Ther cuss! But, you're joking, ain't ye?"

"Nary a joke. He has been here—rode his hoss right into this bar-room. He is a holy terror on wheels, he is."

"I should say so. Anyhow, he's got my hoss, and I've got no money to buy another, so I reckon I'll hev ter look up a job and drop anchor here, or else hoof it back to Rixford."

"We'll try and help you out either way you wish," promised Stillwood.

"Good enough. So, you're th' new sher'f eh?"

"I shall be, when I take hold."

"And I opine you'll make it warm for Nigel."

"I shall try to."

"Well, when you come to make up your posse, Mr. Stillwood, I'd like ter be one of th' number. I want revenge on that p'izen cuss, and I want my hoss back. If you want ter know my caliber, jest inquire at Rixford."

"All right, my man," I'll see about that when the time comes, and I'll let you know."

"Good enough. You'll find that Ned Bradley is tough warp and full width. I don't brag, so I'll say no more."

"I'll keep you in mind."

In the mean time the Guydons, father and son, had retired from the scene, in order to talk over their defeat. The young man had been running for some minor office on the same ticket with his father.

Many others, too, had sought their homes, and the street was becoming comparatively quiet.

But suddenly a new excitement arose. A rumor went flying around like a streak of wild-fire that the bank had been robbed during the night, and that the watchman had been murdered!

This rumor reached the hotel about the time of the brief conversation between Stillwood and the man from Rixford, and all present started out to learn the truth of the matter.

In front of the bank, not a great distance away, a crowd was beginning to collect, and the excitement was running high.

The bank had been robbed, the watchman had been killed, and there was no mystery about who had done the deeds, for on the door of the rifled safe had been found this notice:

"NOTICE!"

"Fill her up again, Mr. Oakbough, and when you get her full I'll call around and relieve you of the great responsibility of taking care of it."

"Yours for Boodle,

"NIGHT-TIME NIGEL."

Needless to say the whole town was now at fever heat.

Barely two weeks had elapsed since the robbery of the Consolidated Mining Company's office, and such a thing as the return of the robbers in so short a time had not been dreamed of.

And then, to think that they had dared to enter the place on such a night as had just passed, when the whole town was wide awake. It could hardly be credited, but here was the proof of it, and proof that was not to be doubted. It could not be doubted, for the plundered safe bore silent witness to the fact.

Then there was the note on the safe door, bearing the outlaw's own signature; to say nothing of the cold, dead body of poor Tom Daley, the watchman.

This, the murder, was, of course, the greater offense, although it must be confessed that it

was not looked upon as such by those who had lost heavily by the robbery.

The watchman had been overpowered, and silenced by a knife-blow before he could give an alarm.

How entrance had been gained was not plain, but it was evident that Tom Daley had not been false to his trust. He had lost his life, and even as he lay there, stiff and cold, he had his revolver in hand. But he had not fired a shot.

The discovery had been made by Ben Ward, the day watchman and messenger.

He had been up all night, with the rest of the town, and on his way home, just a little after daylight, he noticed that the door of the bank was open, and thought he would step in and see Daley for a few minutes.

On entering, the first thing to meet his gaze was Daley's body on the floor, and the next, the plundered safe.

He gave the alarm immediately, and within ten minutes it was known all over Raspberry.

Stillwood and Oakbough hurried to the scene of the crime, followed by Sheriff Marsdon, and as soon as they entered the bank the young cashier ordered the doors shut against the crowd.

That done, he sent for his father, Byron Oakbough, the president of the bank, and pending his arrival the son and those with him looked carefully around to learn all they could.

There was nothing more to be learned. Raspberry had felt the weight of the outlaw's hand again. The bank president came, and when he saw how completely the bank had been cleaned, he sunk upon a chair with a groan. He was all but ruined. An inquest followed in order, and the verdict was that Thomas Daley had met his death at the hands of an outlaw known as Night-time Nigel.

CHAPTER III.

NIGHT-TIME NIGEL AGAIN.

AFTER the robbery of the Consolidated Mining Company's office, that company offered a reward of five thousand dollars for the capture of the outlaw.

Now appeared another reward of a similar amount, offered by the directors of the Raspberry National Bank.

To win these sums, in addition to various others that had been offered, was the aim and desire of more than one man in that county of Raspberry.

The sum total was but little short of twenty thousand dollars!

Sheriff Marsdon, whose term of office had not quite expired, made another grand effort, but in vain—victory was not for him.

Time passed on, and the country around enjoyed an unusual respite from the depredations of the bad band.

Raspberry county began to hope that it had seen the last of the rascals, and that the reign of terror was at an end—a hope that was vain, as the ensuing pages will show.

Finally came the day when John Stillwood took hold of the reins as sheriff.

He had already selected his posse of a dozen good fellows, at the head of whom was his deputy, Dan Horton. The man from Rixford, Ned Bradley, was also one of the number. Not a man of doubtful "caliber" was to be found in the dozen.

On the night of the day on which Stillwood took the oath of office, the town of Raspberry set out to have a little jubilee to celebrate the event. That is to say, a goodly number of Stillwood's backers did. And these were made up principally of the chosen posse and their numerous friends.

Stillwood had to "stand treat," and was called upon to make a speech, which he did on the porch of the Seven Stars.

The new sheriff had formerly been employed as superintendent of the Consolidated Mining Company, and had been under the orders of Lawrence Guydon, who, as has been said, held the post of general manager.

If Guydon had been elected to the Legislature, no doubt Stillwood could have retained his post, but the defeat of Guydon would have meant a change in the office of superintendent at the mines, whether Stillwood had been elected or not.

Only a few days after the election, therefore, Stillwood tendered his resignation, as indeed he had to in order to assume his new position, and a man named Ulysses Burbank was installed in his place at the beginning of the month.

Burbank was a stranger at Raspberry, but he had the appearance of being a man of "sand," and took hold with a determined grip.

He was about thirty-five years of age, with black hair, eyes and beard, and not at all bad-looking.

Stillwood and he had not "cottoned" to each other on meeting, and there seemed no likelihood of their doing so.

The retiring superintendent had taken pains to give his successor every advantage of his long experience, which Burbank had accepted as a matter of course, but Stillwood soon saw that they were not cut out for anything nearer than cool acquaintances.

On this night after Stillwood had responded

to the urgent call for a speech, and returned to the bar-room of the hotel, Burbank observed:

"That was pretty well done, Stillwood."

"You refer to my attempted speech?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes."

"Then your statement proves that you are not a competent judge. It was a beggarly attempt to get something out of nothing."

"No, not at all, Stillwood; and I meant what I said. You made a very good address."

"Well, I'll thank you for the compliment, though I can't agree with you."

"Then you are one against the crowd, for haven't they howled themselves hoarse in applause? But, Stillwood, I noticed one thing about your speech."

"And what was that? since from your tone I infer that it is something that does not merit all of the good opinion you have just expressed."

"Oh! not that; the address as a whole was all right. What I mean is this: I noticed that you had not a word to say about Nigel the Outlaw."

"And why should I have?" Stillwood demanded.

"I cannot see why you should not have. From all that I have been able to hear since coming to this place, you were elected to the office of sheriff chiefly because you were thought to be able to bring Nigel to account."

"I expect to perform the duties of the office to the best of my ability, Mr. Burbank. If I can apprehend the rascal, I shall do it. I am not going to make any boasts in that direction, however."

"Well, perhaps you are right, and it will be convenient to have no such vain promises staring you in the face in the event of your failing to break up the outlaw band."

Stillwood was a little nettled by such talk as this, but he could not afford to let it be seen.

Secretly, he had vowed that he would break up the band.

"To judge by the experiences of the past few weeks," he observed, "the outlaws seem to have flown to fresh fields and pastures new. If they continue to make themselves conspicuous by their absence, I am not likely to have an opportunity to prove my unfitness for the office, if that fitness is to be gauged by my ability to cope with them."

"That is true, but it is not likely that they have deserted a field that has been so ripe for spoil. It would not surprise me to hear of them again at any time."

"No, nor me. But, until they appear—Hal! what can that mean?"

A great shouting was heard down the street, several pistol-shots rung out, and a thunder of hoof-beats made the ground fairly tremble.

Sheriff Stillwood had sprung to his feet, and pausing only an instant to listen, made for the door.

When he reached the porch he was just in time to see a band of horsemen wheel around the buildings at the end of the street, and disappear up the valley.

They were yelling like demons, and now a perfect hailstorm of bullets was being poured in the direction they had taken, to the imminent danger of any one who might be in the line of fire.

"Merry thunder!" exclaimed Joshua Hubbard. "Dang me if I don't believe that is Nigel and his band again!"

"I believe you're right," agreed Burbank.

"And what are they doing here?" questioned the sheriff. "What new devilment have they been up to?"

"I reckon we'll know when that crowd comes up." And old Josh indicated a number of men who were running toward the hotel from the direction of the mine office.

By the time these men came up, the street was thronged. The sudden uproar had brought everybody out, and once more the town was in a whirl of excitement.

Foremost among the men who came running from the direction of the mine office, was Deputy Dan Horton.

"What's the row?" Stillwood quickly asked.

"It's Night-time Nigel again!" was the exclaimed answer.

"What has he done this time?"

"Robbed the mine office."

It may be believed that this bit of information created a sensation.

"Is this straight? No mistake about it?" demanded Stillwood, with an expression of stern determination upon his face.

"Oh! it is straight enough," the deputy assured. "The office has been robbed, and the outlaws was discovered just as they was mountin' their horses at th' rear of th' building. Th' cry was raised, but afore anybody could get at 'em they were off like th' wind."

"Well, get our horses, quick! We'll see what we can do."

Several of the posse were on hand, and, taking a whistle from his pocket the sheriff sounded a shrill signal that soon brought the others.

In less than ten minutes they were mounted and dashing away up the valley, hot in pursuit.

As soon as they had started, the crowd hurried to the mine office, to find that the report was true:—the big safe had been plundered again, and the watchman was on the floor, bound and gagged.

It was even a more daring exploit than the robbing of the bank had been. That had been done in the small hours of the morning, and at a time when the town was drunk with excitement; but this was early in the evening, when no one would have dreamed of such a thing happening.

No one had observed the horsemen, to notice them, but that was not strange, for horsemen were to be found on the streets of the town at all reasonable hours.

"This is an infernal outrage!" Lawrence Guydon stormed. "Are we never to be secure?"

"It might not have happened, had our sheriff been doing anything but making braggart speeches at the hotel," put in Lancelot, the son. "It will prove what he is good for, anyhow," observed the new superintendent, who had repaired to the office in all haste.

"Something has got to be done, that is sure," cried Guydon the elder. "If we cannot break up this band ourselves, it is about time that the State took the matter in hand."

"I agree with you, sir," put in Burbank. "But," he added, "let us see what the new sheriff will do."

"I can tell you that now," declared Lancelot.

"What will it be?"

"Nothing."

Several minutes—twenty, perhaps—had elapsed since the discovery, and yet the watchman had not been released.

Now he began to kick on the floor with his heels with such vigor that attention was called to him.

"Release that fellow," the elder Guydon ordered. "I hadn't thought about him at all."

The watchman was set free, and he got upon his feet in no even temper.

"It's a mighty wonder ye wouldn't leave a feller in that fix all night," he growled.

"It would serve you right if we had," snapped the manager. "What are you employed for?"

"I couldn't help what happened," protested the man; "I had no show against 'em all."

"But, how did they get in?"

"At th' rear door; and th' first I knowed I was in their hands, with a barker poked into my ear."

"But, the safe— How did they open that? They have not used force."

"No, and they didn't need to, for th' leader of th' band unlocked it as neat as you could 'a' done!"

"Unlocked it! There is something strange about this, for the combination was changed only last week."

"Can't help that; he done it jest th' same, fer I was layin' on th' floor here, and could watch 'em. By th' way, you'll find a note in there that he left."

The younger Guydon looked, and, sure enough, a folded note was discovered.

It read in these words:

"DEAR OLD GUYDON:—

"Fill her up again, old fel, and I'll call around when I can spare the time. I am not half done yet. Can't you run up that reward a little higher, to make it interesting?"

"Yours on the make,

"NIGHT-TIME NIGEL."

CHAPTER IV.

STILLWOOD SCORES DEFEAT.

SHERIFF STILLWOOD meant business.

When he dashed out of the valley, at the head of his men, he was grimly determined to overtake the outlaws if possible.

If it came to a fight with them, so much the better. He was willing to take the risks, on his part, for the sake of getting a shot at the outlaw chief. If he could once get him under cover of his revolver, he felt that he would have him.

But Nigel was a foeman worthy of his steel, as he was destined to learn.

"Can you guess which way he has gone?" Stillwood asked of Horton, when they were well out of town.

"Can't," was the brief answer.

"And that means a stop at every diverging trail."

"That's about the only way. Got your lantern?"

"Yes, I've got that."

As he spoke the sheriff took a small bull's-eye from its place at his belt and flashed its light ahead.

"We can't mistake the way they turn, with this light," he observed.

"Well, no, hardly."

They thundered on, and ere long the first fork in the trail was reached.

Stillwood ordered a halt, and sprung to the ground, where he flashed the light of his lantern about.

"Straight ahead," he quickly announced, and

vaulting into the saddle the party dashed forward as before.

Several miles must now be traversed before another branching trail would be reached, and as the road was good the men put their horses to a lively gait.

It was dark, but not so dark that objects close around could not be seen. The night was clear, but there was no moon. The outline of the road was plain enough, however, and moonlight would not have lent them any more speed.

"You understand what your reward is to be," Stillwood remarked, as they rode on.

"We've got your word on it," answered Dan Horton.

"And you know that the word of John Stillwood is his bond. To the man who captures the outlaw, half of the sum-total of the rewards offered; the other half to be divided equally among the rest."

"But, where does your share come in?" asked Ned Bradley.

"I want none of it, unless I take the man myself, when I will lay claim to the half, the same as any of you. Is that not fair?"

"It couldn't be fairer."

"Very well, then, do your best, every man of you."

"We will! We will!"

On they pushed, and finally the second diverging trail was reached.

Here another halt was made, and again Stillwood dismounted and searched the ground for signs.

The result was the same as before.

"They have kept to the road," he announced, as he sprung to the saddle.

"And that means that we've got to chase 'em through Red Rock Canyon," remarked Horton, as they sped onward.

"Yes, for there is no way of turning from the main road now," Stillwood agreed readily.

"And that is where they ambushed Marsdon and picked off half of his men."

"True enough, but I am not going to scare."

"Nor I. I'll follow ye right inter th' hot place, if th' trail leads there."

"And here too," the others assured.

"If they should open fire on us at any point, boys," counseled Stillwood, "do not slack up a bit, but ride right onto them and give it to 'em hot. We'll have the advantage of their flashes to aim by."

On and on they plunged, and finally were in the canyon.

This was one of the meanest trails in all that part of the country.

There were parts of it where two wagons could not pass, and it not infrequently happened that teamsters met in these difficult places and had trouble enough in getting by each other.

On these occasions, if swearing would have removed the rocky walls, the whole region would have soon been reduced to a level plain, for the swearing indulged in was generally of the "tallest" kind.

In this canyon it was but natural that the pursuing party should reduce their speed.

It would have been folly for them to have plunged ahead in the intense darkness, regardlessly, for they were likely to meet an opposing team at any point, when a collision would be almost unavoidable.

But they pressed on, at reduced speed, every man with his weapons ready for instant use, in case of necessity.

Occasionally Stillwood would flash the light of his bull's-eye ahead for a brief instant, to make sure that the way was clear.

Every time he did so, however, it was at the risk of drawing a bullet.

An ambush was certainly looked for, and what could better attest the bravery of the men than that they were willing to take the risk of running into one.

But all trails have an end, and this one was no exception.

And it came to an end that was unexpected, sudden, and startling.

Stillwood flashed his light ahead, after they had advanced some distance in the intense darkness since the last time he had done so, and in the same second he jerked his horse to a stop.

Right ahead of them, not five yards away, were the ragged branches of a big tree that completely choked the narrow canyon.

A moment more and they would have plunged into it, and perhaps with fatal effect to more than one of their number.

The tree had clearly been cut and dropped into the canyon from above, in order to cut off pursuit.

It was a bad balk, and ended the chase for this time.

Stillwood did not take for granted that this was all, however, for he believed, and with good reason, that the outlaws were ambushed on the other side of the barrier, and no sooner, scarcely, had the barrier been discovered than he began to empty his revolver through it.

His men followed suit, and a score of bullets were sent hurtling through the branches of the fallen tree.

When they stopped firing, however, and silence reigned, they had to conclude that they had been shooting at nothing.

"But we couldn't know that," commented Deputy Dan, "and it was best to be on th' safe side."

"Right ye are in sayin' that, every time," agreed one of the others.

Sheriff Stillwood was silent.

He had met with a signal defeat.

It was not pleasing to acknowledge it, but it was the stubborn fact.

"Boys," he ejaculated, "we're left."

"And left bad!" echoed Horton.

"This has been planned beforehand," Stillwood reflected, "and the tree has been cut and made ready for rolling down into the canyon at the proper time."

"That is plain enough," the others agreed.

"And it was a big stroke of luck for us that we didn't run into it, too," the sheriff further commented.

"It would have been bad for us if we had," declared Deputy Dan.

"Well, here the trail ends for this time, anyhow. It is a clean defeat, and we can't get around that."

"And no doubt you feel pooty sore, Sher'f Stillwood."

"I admit that I do," Stillwood owned. "I hoped to exchange lead with the rascals, if nothing more."

"Well, better luck next time."

"I hope so."

They turned and started back to Raspberry, and in none too good spirits.

Stillwood felt this defeat keenly, but there was no help for it, and he had done all that any other man could have done.

Still, he knew that he would have to hear the stinging reproaches of his political opponents, if not the same from some of his supporters.

When the party rode into the valley it was midnight, but the town was still awake and active, anxious to know the result of the new sheriff's first attempt to bag the outlaw band.

"Where is your game?" young Guydon saluted, as Stillwood sprung from his horse at the door of the Seven Stars.

"It is still at large, and promises further sport," the sheriff answered. "I didn't succeed in getting hold of the fellows."

"They promise further sport, eh?" commented Burbank, the new superintendent. "It is costly kind of sport for the Consolidated Mining Company."

"Well, I haven't got them, that is the long and the short of it," declared Stillwood, "and they are still at large and must be looked out for. They played a cute trick this time. They cut down a tree and blocked the canyon with it, and so cut us off from following them further. But, I am not done with them yet."

"That is just what Giles Marsdon used to say," observed Guydon the father, in an aside.

"See here, Guydon," spoke up Marsdon, who happened to overhear, "that remark is uncalled-for. Give th' young man a chance."

"His remarks cannot hurt me," said Stillwood; "let them pass."

"Oh! he shall have every chance in the world, so far as I am concerned," declared Guydon, "but it is my opinion that it won't do him any good."

"Well, let that be seen hereafter."

"Certainly, certainly."

"Was it a clean sweep at the mine office again?" Stillwood inquired.

"Yes, it was," Guydon snapped.

"And what is the loss?"

"About seventy thousand."

"That is a scorcher, and no mistake. When were you going to ship it off?"

"Next week."

"And now you haven't any to ship, of course. I want to know when your next shipment is to be made, Mr. Guydon, for I think it will be a good bait for Nigel."

"All right, you shall be informed, if you think it will do any good."

"As to that, I can't say of course."

There was plenty of room for Stillwood to get into a quarrel with the younger Guydon or Ulysses Burbank, or both, during the next half-hour, but he refused to take up any of their offensive remarks.

At the end of that time he retired to his room in the hotel, but it was something like an hour before he fell asleep, owing to the excitement through which he had so recently passed.

CHAPTER V.

AN APPALLING CONFESSION.

On the following morning Raspberry was shocked.

There was a new cause for excitement, before which the past events were comparatively tame. Marion Oakbough, wife of Byron Oakbough, the President of the Raspberry National Bank, had been found in her room, murdered.

Sheriff Stillwood was awakened out of a sound sleep by the great hubbub in the street, and springing up, found that the sun was shining in at his windows. A glance at his watch showed him that it was after eight.

He had slept two hours over his usual time, and made haste to don his clothes in order to learn what all the excitement was about.

"Lynch him!"
"String him up!"
"He's ther cuss!"

These shouts, and many more of similar import, came to the sheriff's ears from the street below.

Stillwood hurried on his clothes and rushed from the room, and as soon as he gained the porch of the hotel he demanded:

"What's the excitement about, citizens?"

"Hello! here's Stillwood!" was the shout that greeted him. "Come, sheriff, we have got a critter fer you ter hang!"

"But who is it?" the sheriff demanded again, "and what is the trouble?"

"The trouble is murder, that's what," cried the mob, "and th' murderer is th' sleek-faced old hypocrite, Byron Oakbough!"

"Byron Oakbough!"

The exclamation fell from the sheriff's lips in a tone of the greatest surprise.

"Yes, Byron Oakbough," was the assurance.

"But, whom has he killed?" Stillwood asked.

"He has killed his purty wife, that's who. Oh! you needn't be knocked out by it, sheriff, fer it is fact right down ter bed-rock, and we have got ther dead-wood on him hard."

"But, gentlemen, there must be some mistake. Byron Oakbough is no murderer, and I'm willing to stake my life on it. We must go slow in this matter, and—"

"Go slow be hanged!" yelled one of the mad mob.

"He is guilty, and as sheriff o' this county we call on you ter hang him!" another shouted.

"If you don't," cried still another, "we'll do it ourselves!"

Stillwood was amazed. Could such a thing be possible—Byron Oakbough the murderer of his young and handsome wife? It did not seem that it could be, and yet there must be strong suspicion against him to raise such a clamor as this.

It was horrible enough to learn that the young wife had been murdered, but to have it said that her husband was guilty of the crime added horror to horror.

"I still think and believe that there is some mistake," Stillwood said. "If not, if it is as you say, even then you may rest assured that there will be no hanging done that is not according to law."

There was a ring of grim determination in the voice.

"There won't, hey?" cried some of the rough element of the crowd. "I opine we will show ye about that."

"If you won't lynch th' villain, then we're goin' ter do it ourselves."

"You are going to do nothing of the sort, while I am sheriff of the county," Stillwood declared. "You had better cool down and act like sensible men, all of you. The days of lynch-law are past, in this section."

"We'll show ye about that!"

"Hear him talk!" cried a political opponent. "Has he set up ter be th' Regulator of Raspberry?"

"I intend to see that law and order are maintained, as far as lies in my power," the sheriff retorted. "When was this crime discovered?"

"About half an hour ago," answered a cooler head.

"And what seems to be the proof against Oakbough?"

"Wly, the deed was done with a knife that he has been known to carry, and it is said that blood has been found on the right sleeve of his coat."

"Who made the discovery of the crime?"

"Oakbough himself."

"And who first suspected him?"

"Don't know."

These questions and answers were put and given as rapidly as tongue could utter the words.

"Well," the sheriff observed, "I'll go down to the house and investigate the matter a little."

"Yes, and while you're doin' that, we'll hang th' murderer!" cried one of the crazy mob.

"You had better not undertake anything of the—"

The sheriff was interrupted by a great shout, and looking down the street he saw another portion of the mob approaching, and Byron Oakbough was in their midst, with a rope around his neck.

Just ahead of them, running toward the hotel with all speed, were Deputy Dan Horton, Ned Bradley, and two others of Stillwood's posse.

They were evidently coming to get the sheriff. Snatching his revolver from his belt, Stillwood sprang from the porch and ran to meet the approaching mob, at the same blowing a loud and shrill whistle-signal for his men.

Seeing his coming, Dan Horton and the three with him came to a stop, and their revolvers gleamed in the morning sunlight.

Two others of the posse quickly responded to the signal, and by the time the sheriff met the mob he had six men to back him.

But they were between two fires.

The crowd that had been so eager in front of the hotel had followed on a run, and in a moment the sheriff and his men, and the prisoner, were in the midst of the howling mob.

Stillwood was cool-headed, in spite of the

excitement all around, and he realized fully the danger of the position he was in.

He knew that threats, at first, would only precipitate a fight, in which he and his men were sure to be worsted.

If that happened, Byron Oakbough, whether innocent or guilty, would be lynched in short order.

"Slow, friends!" he exclaimed in even tone, "slow! slow! Don't let's be in too much haste!"

"He's th' cuss as done it," cried one of the fellows that had hold of the prisoner, "and he's got ter swing!"

"Yes, but let's give him a chance to speak. We don't want to make any mistake in this matter."

"I am innocent!" cried the terrified prisoner; "as God is my witness, I am innocent of this crime!"

"Ha, ha! that's too thin! How about th' knife, and th' blood?"

"I don't know, I don't know. I swear that I am innocent of the deed. Save me, Sheriff Stillwood! You are responsible for my life!"

"Have no fears, sir," exclaimed the sheriff, encouragingly, "for I am sure the citizens of Raspberry will give you a fair hearing."

"He's had all th' hearin' he'll git," shouted one of the desperate element of the mob. "He's got ter swing!"

"That's ther tune! Fetch him along, and we'll make short work of him!"

A tug was given at the rope, and the unhappy prisoner was pulled along for some yards.

"Men of Raspberry," called out the sheriff, "shall this disgraceful thing go any further?"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Hang him!"

"No! no! Fair trial!"

It was clear that all present were not with the mob.

There was another element that favored moderation, whatever their belief as to the man's innocence.

Byron Oakbough was a man of sixty. His hair was almost white, and being now hatless, it tossed wildly about, and ought to have won for him more respect than he was receiving.

Only a few seconds had elapsed since the arrival of the sheriff and his men upon the scene.

During that brief time Stillwood had been looking over the crowd, to see just what it was made up of.

He found that the mob element was composed of the worst material in the town, while on the outside was another class, men of hard heads and sober sense, in favor of moderation.

Sheriff Stillwood laid a hand on the rope that was around Oakbough's neck.

"Hands off!" he thundered.

As he uttered the command his five-shooter was raised.

There was hesitation, and a growl of disapproval was heard.

Deputy Dan and the others had formed themselves about the sheriff, and their revolvers looked in all directions.

"Hands off!" Stillwood cried again, "or I'll shoot, and shoot to kill!"

The rope was dropped, and the cowed mob fell back.

"If you would not listen to reason you shall yield to force," the sheriff exclaimed. "We will have no outlaw proceedings here in our midst. Fall back, every mother's son of you, and make room for us to pass."

"Rah fer Stillwood!" shouted some one on the outer circle of the crowd. "We don't want lynch-law here!"

"This is our new sher'f," sneered another, of the opposing side. "He takes sides with a rank murderer."

"I am no murderer!" cried Oakbough.

"Every man is innocent till he is proven guilty," reminded Stillwood.

"And ha'n't we got proof enough ag'in' ther old rat?" demanded one of the mob.

"The law does not rest with you, sir. Make room now, and the first one who makes a move to take this man out of my hands will get a bullet."

With his hand on Mr. Oakbough's arm, then, Stillwood moved forward, his men with him, and their revolvers ready for use.

They headed for the Oakbough residence.

By this time the rest of the sheriff's dozen had put in an appearance, and he was now well backed.

The mob melted away into one great crowd, its ringleaders fell into the background, and the sheriff and his men led the way toward the bank president's house.

"You are not a prisoner, sir," observed Stillwood, as they walked along, "but you had better remain close by us until we can see you safely into your house again."

"And I am glad enough to do so," Mr. Oakbough declared. "I am innocent, as innocent as you are," he added. "Find the murderer of my poor wife, Stillwood, and I'll give you every cent I am worth in the world."

They were now at the house, where another great crowd was collected, and were about to

mount the steps when a woman's piercing scream was heard.

It was uttered by Rhoda Oakbough, the bank-president's daughter, and she flew down the steps, crying:

"My father is innocent! Release him, for I swear that he is innocent! I am the one who did this awful deed!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE TREND OF THE EVIDENCE.

AN earthquake could not have occasioned greater surprise.

The crowd became as silent as a congregation assembled in church.

Was it possible—could it be true—this young and beautiful woman a murderess?

Had she been accused of the crime, no one would have believed her guilty for a moment, but she stood a murderess self-confessed.

"It is true," she repeated; "my father is innocent, and I am guilty. Let him go, and take me in his stead."

Sheriff Stillwood's face flushed painfully.

As for Mr. Oakbough, his eyes were fairly starting from their sockets.

"You!" he exclaimed. "You! Impossible." The young woman's eyes met those of her father in a seemingly cold, pitiless stare, as Stillwood thought.

"It is true," she said, simply.

The father uttered a groan, and sunk to the steps.

"Then hang me," he hoarsely gasped, "but spare her. I do not want to live."

"Release him, sir," the beautiful girl ordered. "He is innocent. Take me in his place. Do not delay."

"Your father is not under arrest, Miss Oakbough," spoke Stillwood, then, "nor are you. Return into the house, and you, Mr. Oakbough, go in, too. There will be no arrests until after the coroner has decided upon this matter."

Some hisses were heard in the crowd.

"You're a healthy sheriff!" some one exclaimed.

"Who said that?" Stillwood angrily demanded.

No one responded.

"If the man who uttered those words will come out here and face me," the now angered sheriff went on, "I will oblige him by cramming them down his throat. I know my business, men of Raspberry. I am only sheriff, and not prosecuting attorney of the county."

"You are all right, Stillwood," spoke up Giles Marsdon, the ex-sheriff, who had made his way to the front; "don't let them nettle you."

"It is enough to nettle anybody."

"He's th' Regulator o' Raspberry!" sung out a voice, evidently the one who had made the same remark once before.

"Very well," responded Stillwood, "I accept the title you want to force upon me. I'll try to do a little regulating, too."

"Rah!" shouted his friends and backers, "that's jest the ticket! Sheriff Stillwood, th' Regulator o' Raspberry!"

Stillwood gave some instructions to his deputy, then, regarding the watching of the house to see that no one escaped, and entered the house, while Dan proceeded to carry out the orders he had received.

The members of the posse were soon stationed where they could watch the house from every side.

Soon after Stillwood had entered, the coroner arrived.

Right after him came the prosecutor.

The name of the coroner was Henry Rentlow. He was a hard-headed man of business, fifty years old, and one who would stand no foolishness.

The prosecuting attorney has been introduced. He was the lawyer, Martin Spangle, who has already figured in these pages.

A short, slim man he was, as perhaps has been mentioned, clad in black. He was of much importance in his own mind.

Stillwood, Marsdon, and some others, were standing in the hall when these entered.

Mr. Oakbough and his daughter had disappeared.

"Where is the room where this crime was committed?" asked Spangle.

"I presume it is up-stairs," answered Stillwood.

"Then you don't know, eh?"

"No, sir."

"Um! I understand you have let the prisoners go, sir."

"I rescued Mr. Oakbough from the hands of the mob, if that is what you mean. I have had no prisoners."

Just then Mr. Oakbough appeared at the head of the stairs.

His eyes were wet, tears were upon his face, and when he spoke his voice was husky and trembling.

"Come this way, gentlemen," he said.

Martin Spangle led the way, the others following, Stillwood and the coroner bringing up the rear.

When they entered the room a horrible sight was presented to their gaze.

On the floor, at the side of the bed, lay the

murdered woman, as white as marble, but handsome even in death.

She was clad only in her splendid night-robe, which covered her fair form down to her small, white feet. Her long, thick, glossy hair lay spread out behind her, and only for the terrible red stain upon the whole bosom of the night-robe she might have been thought sleeping.

"There," said Mr. Oakbough, pointing with trembling hand, "there is all that remains of my fair young wife. And they would have lynched me as her murderer—me, who loved her as I loved my own life!"

"Then you declare that you are innocent, eh?" interrupted Spangle.

"As God hears me, I am innocent."

The answer was firm and earnest.

"But, what was the proof against you? What gave the mob such a desire to make short work of you? Come, let's have your statement."

In his eagerness to get at the truth, Mr. Spangle was slightly overreaching himself.

"Excuse me, Mr. Spangle," interrupted Henry Rentlow, stepping forward, "but if I understand my position it is my business to conduct this matter. I believe I am coroner, am I not?"

"Beg pardon, beg pardon, sir," said Spangle, quickly; "merely a few informal questions, Mr. Rentlow."

"Very well, but I prefer to make them formal. I will try to get at the facts of the case in regular order."

"Certainly, sir, certainly," and Spangle bowed himself into the background.

The coroner ran his eyes over the men assembled in the room, and selected two of them for his jury.

Stepping then to a window, and raising it, he made further selections from the crowd in front of the house, until he had made up the required number.

These men were admitted, and having been duly impaneled a jury, in the hall below, were taken to view the scene of the horrible murder.

That done all repaired to a room on the lower floor, where the coroner began his inquest.

The first witness called was Mr. Byron Oakbough.

It may be mentioned that Francis Oakbough, his son, was present, and all the rest of the household, including the self-accused Rhoda.

Mr. Oakbough took the witness-chair, still weeping, and it was some little time before he could control his voice.

The preliminary questions were put, and then the coroner proceeded.

"How long has the murdered woman been your wife?" he next asked.

"Four years, sir," was the answer.

"Did you occupy the same room with her?"

"I did."

"At what time did you get up this morning?"

"About half-past seven, sir."

"Was your wife awake at that time?"

"No, sir."

"What did you do?"

"I put on my trousers and gown, and went to the bath-room to take a bath."

"And you were in the bath when the murder was done?"

"Yes."

"Tell us how you made the discovery."

"It is easily told. Would to God that I had appeared upon the scene in time to prevent the deed. I suppose I was in the bath-room fifteen minutes. When I came out and returned to the bed-room I made the horrible discovery. My wife lay on the floor, as you have all seen her, her bosom bathed in her life blood, and a knife of mine buried to the hilt in her breast."

Mr. Oakbough broke down at this point, and it was some seconds before he could go on.

"The shock nearly crazed me," he resumed. "I hardly knew what to do. I drew out the knife, and as a great spurt of blood followed it, I screamed and ran from the room. I ran down the stairs and out the front door, shouting, I believe, 'My wife has been murdered! My wife has been murdered!'"

Again he paused. His forehead was bathed in perspiration.

Sheriff Stillwood looked around at the others.

Francis Oakbough sat with face as pale as death itself, the horror of the crime seemingly having made a deep impression.

Rhoda, while as pale as her brother, was staring at her father with that same hard expression which Stillwood had noted before.

"I was soon surrounded by a crowd of rough men," Mr. Oakbough went on, "and one of them pointed to the bloody knife in my hand and demanded to know what I was doing with it in my possession. I told him, as I have told you, but my word was not believed. A word from that man cast suspicion upon me, and they seized me and hurried me back to the house, where, as soon as they saw the body of my poor wife, they began to threaten to lynch me. My coat hung on a chair near the door, where I had placed it on the previous night, and one of the men finding blood on that, my fate was quickly decided."

"At this point my son appeared at the door, and tried to insist upon my being released, but

it was all in vain. All he did was to detain them there a little while. In the mean time the report had been carried through the town, and when finally I was dragged to the street it seemed as though the whole town was crying for my life. A rope was put around my neck, and only for the sheriff I would now be a dead man."

As he ended his narration he sunk back into his chair, overcome with emotion and again wept aloud.

"How often are you in the habit of taking a bath?" the coroner presently inquired.

"About once a week."

"How had any one access to the bed-room while you were in the bath-room?"

"In order to go into the bath-room it was necessary for me to come out into the hall. The bath-room is only a crude affair, as of course it must be, here, and the water comes from a tank on the roof of the extension."

"I see. Well, how came that blood on the sleeve of your coat?"

"I do not know."

"That is all for the present. Before calling another witness, gentlemen of the jury, we will visit that bath-room."

The coroner led the way, the jurymen following, and some of the others after them. They entered the bath-room, and there, in several places, and especially in the wash-basin, were signs of blood freshly made.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERY MORE CONFOUNDED.

At this discovery the coroner shook his head. It augured ill for the accused man, that was certain.

Perhaps his object in visiting the bath-room had been to wash blood from his hands.

This thought, at any rate, took possession of every mind.

"What do you think of this?" the coroner asked, turning to Stillwood.

"I prefer to express no opinion," was the answer.

"Well, perhaps you are right. I will let the jurymen draw their own conclusions."

They looked around, and then left the bath-room and started down-stairs to continue the investigation.

As they emerged from the bath-room the coroner and the sheriff, who were in advance of the others, caught sight of Rhoda Oakbough as she flitted around a turn in the hall and darted down the stairs ahead of them.

"Did you see who that was?" the coroner asked, in an undertone.

"Yes," Stillwood responded.

"Who?"

"Miss Rhoda."

"Exactly. There is something stranger than I can understand about her action in this matter."

"You know she has declared that she is the guilty one."

"Yes, but do you believe that?"

"I do not know what to think about it. It is a strange thing for her to do, if not guilty."

"So I think. If not guilty, she must have a deep object in it all."

"That is plain."

They now entered the lower room again, and all took their places.

Miss Oakbough was there, sitting as quiet as though she had not been out of her chair.

The next witness called was Francis Oakbough.

Of course it is needless to quote the preliminary questions.

"Tell us all you know about this matter," the coroner directed.

"I was wakened out of a sound sleep by a great shouting in the street, followed immediately by loud voices in the hall and the heavy tramp of many feet on the stairs. I sprang out of bed and hastily put on my clothes. When I stepped out of my room I found the hall full of men, and heard voices in father's room. I heard the word 'murderer' in savage tones, and almost trembling with fear I made my way to the room to learn what had happened. At the sight I beheld there it seemed as though my heart stopped beating. I was, for a moment, too horror-stricken to utter a word. I insisted upon my father's innocence, but my voice in the matter had little weight."

"I hardly know what happened, or how it happened, but the next I seemed to realize about it I was on the outer edge of a great mob, and father was in their midst with a rope around his neck. They were all shouting for his life, and I was helpless to lend him any assistance whatever. What followed after that, you all know."

"Were you and your step-mother on good terms?" the coroner questioned.

"We were, sir."

"Have you any suspicion as to who the murderer is?"

"Not the slightest."

"You believe your father innocent?"

"Yes, positively."

Some questions were asked concerning the members of the household, servants included, and the witness was dismissed.

Joan Reytol was next called.

This woman held a position that might be named head servant. She had had general supervision of the house, under Mrs. Oakbough's directions.

"How long have you been in this family?" was asked.

"Two years, sir."

"Have Mr. and Mrs. Oakbough been on good terms during that time?"

"So far as I know, sir, until—"

The woman paused, and Sheriff Stillwood noted that her eyes had met those of Rhoda Oakbough.

"Go on," directed the coroner.

"Until yesterday, sir," the woman finished.

"And what happened yesterday?"

"They quarreled."

"What about?"

"I do not know."

"Did you consider it a serious quarrel?"

"I heard Mr. Oakbough make a serious threat."

"Ha! what was that?"

"He told Mrs. Oakbough that if she let the secret out, and brought such a disgrace upon him, she would regret it. 'If I thought you would do it,' he said, 'I'd kill you!'"

All eyes were upon Mr. Oakbough, whose position, now, was uneaviable.

He sat pale and trembling, his eyes fixed upon the woman who had uttered the damning testimony against him.

Sheriff Stillwood looked at Rhoda. She sat with tightly clinched hands and compressed lips, her eyes fixed upon the servant and seemingly burning with hatred. The sheriff believed that she held the key to the mystery.

The case was beginning to assume interesting phases.

"Is that all you can tell us about that?" asked the coroner.

"That is all, sir. The quarrel ended right there, owing to Miss Rhoda, who went into the room just then."

"Well, tell us what you know about the crime."

"I was in the upper hall this morning, and was passing the door of Mr. and Mrs. Oakbough's room, when I heard something like a groan, followed by a fall. I was startled, and paused for an instant to listen. I heard nothing more, however, and went on. At the turn of the stairs I paused again and listened, and while I stood there the door of the room opened and Mr. Oakbough came out."

"I drew back just in time not to be seen, and heard him enter the bath-room. Then I went back, softly, and listened at the door of the bed-room. Nothing was to be heard, and thinking that I was making a fool of myself anyhow, and afraid of being seen at such business as eaves-dropping, I went down stairs. I suppose it was about a quarter of an hour later when the house was in an uproar, and that was the first that I knew of the crime. I came out into the hall, along with the cook, but we could not get up the stair for the crowd."

"But after the crowd had left the house, what did you do then?"

"I went up and went into the room. The cook would not go. I remembered the quarrel I had heard, and the sight of the murdered lady made me suspect Mr. Oakbough of the crime. I looked around carefully, in the few moments I had, and saw drops of blood just outside the door. They led to the bath-room. There I found blood-marks in several places, especially in the wash-basin."

"And you were alone?"

"I was for a few moments, but I was soon joined by Miss Rhoda. She came from her room, and was buttoning her dress when she came into the bath-room."

"You believed she had just got up?"

"I had no reason to think otherwise."

"What did she say?"

"'Good heavens!' she exclaimed, 'what has happened?' 'Your mother has been murdered,' I answered. 'My God!' she cried, 'is it true, then?' She rushed from the bath-room into the bed-room, I following her, and she stood for some moments looking at the poor dead lady as though paralyzed."

"What followed then?" the coroner questioned further.

"Well, sir," was the response, "she stood for some moments, as I have said, and then she turned to me, in a quiet, determined way, and remarked: 'They accuse poor papa of this, but he is innocent. I am the one who killed her.'"

"And what then?"

"She turned and left the room, leaving me standing there too surprised to move or speak. A little later, when the crowd came back to the house, she ran out and declared that she was guilty."

That was all that Joan Reytol was called upon to say.

The cook was called next, but her testimony amounted to nothing, and she was soon dismissed.

Then Rhoda Oakbough took the stand.

She was pale, but her face bore an expression of calm determination.

A strikingly beautiful girl she was, not over-

twenty years of age, of gentle mien and slender form. She looked anything but a murderess.

When the usual inquiries had been put, the coroner asked:

"What do you know about this matter, Miss Oakbough?"

"I know all about it," was the answer.

"Let us hear your story."

"When my father left his room this morning, and went into the bath-room, I stole from my room to his. Mrs. Oakbough was sleeping. I took up my father's knife, which was on a chair near his coat, and plunged it to the hilt in his wife's breast, at the same time dragging her from the bed. Father's coat fell from the chair, and one sleeve fell into the blood. I quickly hung the coat up again, and ran from the room. I was frightened. I saw that father would be suspected."

"When I regained my own room I thought of the blood that was on my hand and arm. To wash it off there, I knew, would be fatal to me. I hoped father would not be suspected, and in that case, of course, I would never have confessed. I waited for the discovery to be made. It soon came. I heard father cry out, and then he dashed along the hall and down the stairs like a madman."

"As soon as he was gone I hastened to the bath-room, washed off the blood in all haste, and got back to my room before any one could see me. I can see, now, that what I have done has only strengthened the suspicion against father, but he is innocent, and I alone am guilty."

"She spoke clearly, calmly, and her manner was impressive."

"What was your object in doing such a deed?" the coroner asked.

"I hated the woman," was the answer.

"Rhoda, you are speaking a falsehood," cried Mr. Oakbough. "You are no more guilty of this crime than I am."

"I am telling the truth," was the calm assurance.

"You are trying to shield the real criminal," the father cried. "If you know who did this thing, do not hold it back."

"You have heard my confession."

Francis Oakbough sat and looked at his sister like one turned to stone.

"How about your first words to Joan Reytol?" asked the coroner.

"They are meaningless now. I was as yet undecided whether to confess or not. After looking again at the body of my victim, however, and fully realizing the strength of the suspicion against my father, I decided my course, and I am ready to give myself up to suffer the penalty for my crime."

"Why did you choose this particular time for the deed?"

"I acted upon impulse."

"Why did you not take care that suspicion should point at some other than your father?"

"I did not realize, till it was too late, that he could be suspected."

"What about the quarrel between your father and his wife, which your entrance to the room interrupted?"

"I do not imagine that it was anything serious."

"Why did you hate the woman?"

"I decline to answer that."

CHAPTER VIII.

GROWING WORSE AND WORSE.

AT that point the coroner stopped.

He announced that he would look again about the scene of the crime.

Direction that neither Mr. Oakbough nor Rhoda be permitted to leave the room being given, he led his jury up-stairs.

Particular attention was paid to the hall, and to the marks of blood that led from the room of the murder to the bath-room. Beyond that point not a drop of blood was to be found, and no blood-marks were found in Rhoda's room.

After a careful investigation they returned below.

The coroner called Mr. Oakbough again.

"You have heard," he said, "what Joan Reytol has told us about overhearing a quarrel between you and your wife."

"Yes, sir."

"What was that quarrel about?"

"It was not a quarrel, but a little point of dispute. Its nature I cannot disclose."

"Is it true that you threatened your wife's life on that occasion?"

"If I did, it was in the mad haste of a passionate moment. No thought was further from my mind."

"What was the secret to which you referred?"

"I will not disclose it."

"Do you fully realize your position?"

"I think I do."

"You had better make known everything. That quarrel unexplained may make a bad impression."

"It might not better, were it explained."

"You still deny your guilt?"

"I do."

"Do you believe that your daughter is guilty?"

"I do not, sir."

"Do you know that she is not?"

"No; for if I did I would quickly prove it."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"No one."

"Had your wife any enemy that you are aware of?"

"No, sir."

"Have you anything further to say?"

"I have only this to say: I am innocent of this crime. Do you find any marks of blood on me? Do you find any marks of blood in the bath-room, where I was at the time the deed was done? Do you find any marks of blood in my daughter's room? She says that she committed the crime, but I do not believe it. My coat was in the room, though, and the blood on the sleeve of it may have come there accidentally, or may have been put there purposely; I do not know. These are points to be thought of."

Mr. Oakbough's manner had become a little more calm, and he was beginning to study the case.

He had forgotten that blood had been found in the bath-room.

"We have found marks of blood on your coat," the coroner responded, "and there are marks of blood from the door of your bed-room to the bath-room, and into the bath-room, and in and around the basin. We find none in your daughter's room."

"It is certain that that blood came in the bath-room after I left it and discovered the crime, then," the suspected man remarked.

"Of course it is," spoke up Rhoda. "Have I not said that I went there to wash it off my hands as soon as you went out?"

"Mr. Oakbough," interrupted the coroner, "one question more. While you were in the bath-room did you hear any one in the hall?"

"Yes, some one passed down the hall."

"Did you hear any one in your room?"

"I thought once that I heard my wife getting up."

"Was this soon after you had gone into the bath-room?"

"It was when I had been there about five minutes, I think."

"That is all."

Such was the inquest, in brief, for of course we have omitted quoting any except the more direct and important questions.

The testimony being all in, the coroner made an address to the jury, in which he tried to present the facts of the case in their true light, and show their true relation to each other.

In order that the several points may be brought out fully, a summary of his address will not be out of place.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said, "upon you rests the responsibility of determining this matter according to the evidence you have heard. Mr. Byron Oakbough ran out of his house this morning with a bloody knife in hand, shouting that his wife had been murdered. Naturally that alarm attracted attention, and soon drew a crowd. The bloody knife, and the man's excited manner, raised the suspicion that he himself had done the deed. Men brought him back here, and when they saw the victim, and found blood upon a sleeve of his coat, they fastened the suspicion upon him and threatened to lynch him."

"Mr. Oakbough, however, insisted that he was innocent. He was rescued from the mob, and was brought back here to have a fair hearing. He says he arose about half-past seven and went into the bath-room. He was there about twenty minutes. While in there he heard some one pass down the hall, and thought he heard his wife getting up. When he returned to the bed-room he found his wife lying on the floor, with a knife buried in her bosom. The knife was his own property. He drew the knife out, and with it in his hand ran down-stairs and out of the house."

"I would like to ask a question," one of the jurymen interrupted at this point of the charge.

"What is it, sir?"

"How is it that no blood from that knife has been found beyond the door of the bath-room?"

"Can you answer that, Mr. Oakbough?" asked the coroner.

"No, I can not. Perhaps there was not enough on it to drop."

"Sheriff Stillwood," the coroner requested, "will you look on the stairs, and by the front door, and see if any blood is to be seen?"

Only the upper hall had been examined hitherto.

Stillwood obeyed, and soon returned.

"There are two or three drops on the stairs," he announced, "and two by the front door."

"Very well; and now to resume: Joan Reytol has testified that yesterday she heard Mr. and Mrs. Oakbough quarrel. According to her, Mr. Oakbough told his wife that if she let out a certain secret, and so brought disgrace upon him, she would regret it. 'If I thought you would do it,' she says he said, 'I'd kill you!' You are to determine the importance or non-importance of this."

"Further, this woman says she was in the upper hall this morning, and heard something like a groan, followed by a fall, in Mr. and Mrs. Oakbough's room. She stopped at the turn of the stairs, and while she stood there the door

of the room opened and Mr. Oakbough came out and entered the bath-room. She went on down-stairs, and in about a quarter of an hour heard the alarm given. She came out into the lower hall, and after the crowd had gone out with their prisoner, went up-stairs again. She saw the murdered woman, as you have seen her. She saw the blood in the hall, and followed it into the bath-room, where she also found it in the basin. We have all seen the same."

"May I ask a question?" spoke up another juror.

"Certainly," said the coroner, "and the more the better, perhaps."

"I would like to ask Joan Reytol if she saw anything in Mr. Oakbough's hand when he came out of the room."

"I could not say as to that," the woman answered, promptly. "His hand had a dark look."

"While Joan Reytol stood there in the bath-room," the coroner went on, "Miss Oakbough joined her. 'Good heavens!' she exclaimed, 'what has happened?' 'Your mother has been murdered,' Joan answered. Then Miss Oakbough cried—'My God! is it true, then?' and she rushed from the bath-room to the bed-room, Joan following. There, after a few moments, Miss Oakbough declared that she herself was the guilty one. What are we to make out of this, gentlemen?"

"Miss Oakbough has told you that she is the murderess. She has said that when her father went into the bath-room she went into his bed-room, and there, with a knife which she found on a chair, she murdered his wife, her step-mother. The question is, is she telling the truth? or is she trying to shield the real assassin? That is for you to decide. If she went into that room with the intention of killing her step-mother, why did she go without a weapon with which to do the deed? She could not know that she was to find a weapon there at hand. How is it that we find not a mark of blood on her, or in her room? You must say."

"When her father ran from the house, then, she says, she went into the bath-room and washed off the blood. It is very strange that the trail of blood ends at the bath-room, under these circumstances. She says her object was hatred. Has she not had many other opportunities for such a crime, in the time she has lived with her? If she is giving false testimony, whom is she trying to shield? Is it her father? Does she know that he is guilty, and is—"

"No, no!" the young woman cried, springing up. "It was not he, but I, that did the deed!"

"So you have told us before," commented the coroner, with great calmness.

"But, it is true, it is true."

"Can you prove that it is true?"

"Heavens! is it not proof enough, that I am willing to suffer for my crime, rather than to see my poor father under the terrible suspicion?"

"It is not. We must know your motive, fully, clearly."

The young woman sunk back into the chair.

"Gentlemen of the jury," the coroner went on to conclusion, "there are some facts here that are patent to all. Murder has been done. The young and handsome wife of Bank-President Byron Oakbough is the victim. The great question is: Who did the terrible deed? Another question only second in importance is, What was the motive? No murder is ever committed without a powerful incentive. What has been the incentive in this instance? We cannot help seeing that the evidence is strongly against Mr. Oakbough, but can we say that he is guilty? On the other hand, can we say that he is not guilty? You must take into consideration every point. In what I have said I have endeavored to be strictly impartial. I hope it has appeared so to you. The matter is now in your hands, gentlemen, and I await your verdict."

The twelve men rose and filed out of the room.

Sheriff Stillwood conducted them to a room on the other side of the hall, and closed the door upon them.

In twenty minutes they knocked on the door to signify that they had reached their decision, and were ready to render their verdict.

They were allowed to come out of the room, and followed the sheriff back into the other room as silently and solemnly as they had gone out.

"Have you come to a decision?" asked the coroner.

"We have," responded the foreman.

"Well, what is your verdict?"

"We find that Mrs. Marion Oakbough, came to her death by assassination, and we believe that her husband, Byron Oakbough is the assassin."

With a hollow groan Mr. Oakbough slipped from his chair to the floor in a deathlike faint.

With a wild scream Rhoda sprung forward and threw herself upon her father's prostrate body, as though she would thrust her own between him and the law. And as she did so she cried:

"Oh! he is innocent, innocent! Why will you not believe me? I am the guilty one, gentlemen; take me, but spare, oh! spare him!"

At that moment Francis Oakbough, hitherto silent, stepped forward, and, with folded arms, calmly declared:

"Gentlemen, neither of them is guilty. I am the murderer."

CHAPTER IX.

VAIN PROTESTS MADE.

HERE was surprise indeed.

Every eye was upon the young man.

Could it be that he was speaking the truth?

Was he in his sober senses? Was it possible that he, Francis Oakbough, honored and respected by all who knew him, and recently elected to the State Assembly, could be a murderer?

"Do you know what you are saying?" asked the coroner.

"Perfectly well, sir," was the calm response.

"And you declare that you are the murderer of your step-mother?"

"I am her murderer."

"I do not believe it."

"Why not believe me guilty as readily as my father?"

"The proofs are all against him."

"But he is innocent."

"That remains to be shown."

"The proofs are mere accidental evidence of circumstances."

"Nevertheless, they are strong. Still, laying the evidence aside, I cannot bring myself to believe that your father is guilty. I would believe you guilty as soon. But, in my capacity as coroner, I cannot be governed by anything else than the evidence presented."

"No one saw this crime committed."

"Perhaps not."

"And since I have confessed that I did it, who is going to dispute my word?"

"Why, the circumstances dispute it, your own evidence disputes it, and your sister here disputes it."

"But, if I can prove that I did it?"

"That will be different."

"How am I to prove it, though? A murderer does not take witnessess with him, and does not want witnesses, if he can help it. I have none. Evidence he puts out of reach as far as possible. So I have done. I have nothing but my word to offer."

"What was your motive?"

"I decline to say."

"Then I must decline to accept your confession. Anyhow, this inquest is at an end, and I am done with the matter."

"That being the case," Martin Spangle, coming to the front again, "allow me to put in a word."

"It is for you to do so, now," returned Rentlow.

"Thank you," with a bow in mock politeness. "Sheriff Stillwood, you will put Byron Oakbough under arrest, and take him to the jail."

"I will do so," the sheriff responded.

"You shall do nothing of the kind!" cried Rhoda, springing up. "He is innocent of this crime! Can you not see that the shock is killing him? Have pity upon him, and take me, the true assassin."

"Pardon me, miss," said Spangle, "but we must decline to arrest either you or your brother. It is plain that both of you cannot be guilty, and hence, in my opinion, neither is guilty."

"No," cried the beautiful girl, "we are not both guilty, for Francis is innocent. I did this deed of blood, and no one else."

"Sister," spoke the young man, "let us have no more of this. I know that you are taking this great crime upon yourself in order to avert suspicion from me. I am guilty, so let the law take its course."

"You shall not shield me in this way, Francis!" the sister cried. "I alone am guilty, and I will not allow any one else to suffer for my crime."

It was a peculiar situation.

Brother and sister both confessing guilty of the crime, and all the evidence of the case strongly against their father.

Who was the real criminal? Was it either of the three? Was it indeed Byron Oakbough, and were his devoted children thus trying to save him? If so, their action was likely to fix the suspicion upon him only the stronger."

Was the assassin still another person, known to the brother and sister? If so, who could it be? Who could it be, that they would shield him and allow the terrible suspicion to rest upon their father? Was the guilty one really Rhoda or Francis? And, if so, which one of them was it?"

"Your devotion is more than I deserve," remarked Francis, to his sister's last words. "It shows your noble heart, but I will not allow you to put yourself thus in my place. You are innocent, while I am the—"

"No, no! You speak falsely, you know you do! You know that I am guilty. It may be that you witnessed my crime. You shall not take it upon yourself."

At that moment Mr. Oakbough came to, and was helped to his chair again.

"My God!" he gasped, "is this true? Is it true, or have I been dreaming?"

"To what to you refer?" asked Spangle.

"To my poor wife. Has she really been murdered?"

"Yes, it is true, papa," cried Rhoda, falling upon her knees before him; "it is true, and I am the one who killed her. I dare not ask forgiveness, I dare not look you in the face again, but I—"

Mr. Oakbough had laid his hands heavily upon her shoulders, and now thrust her off at arm's length and looked at her steadily.

His face was colorless, his eyes were wild in their expression, and his breath was hard and labored. His whole manner indicated almost madness, and his face was hard and drawn in its expression.

The daughter seemed to try to shrink from him, but he held her fast.

This lasted for a moment, and then the lines of his face softened, his hands relaxed their cruel grip, and he muttered:

"No, no, it is not so. I cannot—will not—believe it."

"But it is true."

So spoke the girl, lowly.

"Father, it is false," declared Francis.

Mr. Oakbough looked at him.

"I know who the real assassin is," the young man went on.

"You know him!" the father cried.

He sprung to his feet in his eagerness, and his whole manner bespoke his own innocence of the crime.

"Yes, I know him," Francis assured. "It was—"

"Speak his name!" the father exclaimed, excitedly. "Speak his name, and let him suffer the penalty he deserves."

"It was I myself," the young man calmly averred.

Mr. Oakbough reeled back as though shot. He had to grasp a chair for support.

"You!" he cried, "you!"

"Yes, father, I."

The bewildered man looked from one to the other of his children, as though he was vainly trying to understand the matter.

If playing a part himself, he was doing it to perfection.

All those in the room were taking the deepest interest in the dramatic events of the moment, hoping thereby to arrive at a correct conclusion.

But the more that was said the more baffling the case seemed to grow.

"I do not believe it!" Mr. Oakbough exclaimed, after a moment.

"Nor do any of us," echoed one of the recent jury.

"Here are two remarkable confessions," observed Prosecutor Spangle. "Each contradicts the other. Both stand without proof, and one without expressed motive. I shall decline to recognize them for the present."

"But, you shall recognize mine!" cried Francis Oakbough.

"I will not, unless you convince me of your guilt."

"And how am I to do that?"

"Give your motive for the crime, and explain away some of this circumstantial evidence which points so strongly to your father."

"He cannot do either," cried Rhoda, quickly.

"He is innocent, and is only trying to avert suspicion from me."

"Your own confession stands in the same light," reminded Spangle.

"Perhaps it may appear so, sir, but I have given my motive for the deed, and have told how the blood came in the bath-room."

"True, but still your story will not stand scrutiny. The coroner has brought out good points against it. You went to that room to commit murder, according to your own story, but you took no weapon with you. Again, no marks of blood have been found upon you or in your room."

For the time the girl looked puzzled for an explanation of these points, and her hesitation told against her.

"Your confessions are not believed," the prosecutor went on, and he turned from the brother and sister to the sheriff, adding:

"Take Mr. Oakbough and confine him in the jail, and put a guard over him. If he is innocent, his innocence will appear all in good time. If his son or daughter, or both, know that he is innocent, they will not see him hang."

Sheriff Stillwood had already laid his hand upon his prisoner.

"Mr. Oakbough," he said, "I regret that it is my painful duty to carry out the instructions you have heard."

"But, I am innocent!" the old gentleman cried, "as God is my witness, I am innocent of this crime! Do not take me from the house, I beg. At least let me remain in my own house till my poor wife has been laid to rest."

"I regret that I cannot do so," answered Stillwood, in a tone of sympathy, "but I have no choice in the matter. You must come with me."

"He shall not be taken!" cried Rhoda, sternly.

Stillwood glanced at her, and saw a revolver in her hand.

"Release him," she ordered, "or you will regret it."

"My duty is plain," Stillwood returned, "and I shall perform it."

"You do it at your peril."

The revolver was partly raised.

"I cannot help that, Miss Oakbough. At the same time, however, I can assure you that I believe your father innocent of this crime, in spite of all the proof against him, and I promise you that I shall use my utmost endeavors to find the guilty person."

The threatening weapon was raised no higher, but the girl was ready with another assertion of her own guilt.

"You will not have to look further than me," she declared.

Stillwood had, in the mean time, called his deputy into the hall and given him some instructions, and when Dan had carried them out he returned into the house and joined the sheriff.

They now took Mr. Oakbough in charge, and no further opposition being offered, led him from the room and along the hall to the rear door of the house.

There the remainder of the posse was in waiting, and the prisoner was well on the way to the jail before the crowd in front of the house knew of his departure.

As soon as the prisoner had been taken from the room the coroner turned to his jurymen and said:

"Gentlemen, you are discharged. I thank you for the able manner in which you have helped me through this trying hour."

"And," added Spangle, "they deserve credit for the sound-sense verdict they have rendered."

In a few minutes they had all taken their leave, and the brother and sister were alone together in the room.

CHAPTER X.

A BELLOWING BULL AT LARGE.

WISELY, perhaps, the verdict of the coroner's jury was not made known to the public until Mr. Oakbough had been safely lodged in jail.

When it was made known a wild yell went up from the crowd.

"Ther p'izen 'sassin!" cried he who had been the ringleader of the lynch-law mob, "it's a pity we didn't string him!"

"That's what it is!" agreed many of his followers.

"This heur new sher'f is too mighty fresh!"

"That's jest what he is. He wants saltin'."

"And I'm jest th' gallus bird that kin do it fer him, too, and don't ye forgit it!" cried the ringleader, as he braced himself and sparred at nothing for a moment.

This worthy's name was James Garry, though he was better known as "Bull" Garry.

He considered himself a sort of local Sullivan, and thus far in his career had not met with a "knock-out."

He had on one occasion whipped two of the fighters of the town, both at once, and that had given him quite a standing in the eyes of fellows of his class.

"It would sarve him right if we salted him a little, too," another of the late mob urged on.

"That's what it would," others shouted.

"This case might 'a' been all settled, now, if it hadn't been fer him. Now th' county will have ter stand th' expense of his trial."

"And we poor cusses has got ter pay it in th' end."

"That's so."

"I'm fer th' good, old-fashioned lynch-law, every time!"

"Yes, and here too."

It did not take a great deal of such talk as this to make the rowdy element of the town believe that they were a greatly abused part of the community at large.

And the more they thought about it and talked about it, the more it looked to them as though Sheriff Stillwood had done them a personal injury in not allowing them to lynch Mr. Oakbough.

By the time the inquest came to an end, and Mr. Oakbough had been locked up, it was noon, and as many of those who had taken part in the proceedings of the morning had had no breakfast, they were ready enough for dinner.

Sheriff Stillwood boarded at the Seven Stars, and when he came out from his dinner he found quite a crowd in front of the hotel.

"Hello!" he observed to the landlord, "what's the excitement now?"

The landlord appeared to be a little nervous.

"I believe they are talking pretty strong ag'in' you, Stillwood," he made answer.

"Oh! they are, eh? What have I done to them?"

"From what I have been able to catch, it seems they are mad 'cause you didn't let 'em hang Oakbough."

"Ha! that's where their pain lies, is it? I'll have to give them a chance to spit out their spite, I suppose."

"You'd best be keeful, fer I see Bull Garry is at th' head of th' gang."

"I don't care for him."

Stillwood lighted a cigar and passed out upon the porch.

"There he is! There he is, now!" So cried various members of the crowd. "Yas, there's th' pizen skunk, sure 'nuff!" whooped up the ringleader of the gang. The fellow gave a jerk at his hat and a hitch at his belt, and swaggered forward to the porch. "See heur, Mister Dude Sher'f," he saluted, "I want a word wi' you."

Stillwood had been pacing up and down by the door for a moment, and now he stopped and looked up.

"Oh! it's you, eh, Garry," he returned. "What can I do for you?"

"You can't do nothin' fer me," was the savage growl.

"You seem to be out of humor."

"Yas, that's what's th' matter with me, and you orter know what I'm out o' humor about, too."

"You'll have to tell me, for I am no hand at guessing."

Stillwood leaned against a post and puffed away idly.

"And I'm jest th' game chicken that kin do that, every time. What did you take that murderer away from us fer?"

"What murderer?"

"Oakbough, of course."

"Oh! then he is a murderer, eh? I was not aware that he'd been tried yet."

"In course he's a murderer. Didn't th' crowner say so? What more d'ye want nor that?"

"Well, Garry, here in this country we usually give a man a fair trial."

The sheriff's replies were calm and easy.

"He don't deserve no trial, he don't! Any man what'll murder his young and pooty wife in cold blood deserves ter be strung right up, and that's what we'd 'a' done fer him, if you hadn't put in your chip."

"And who had a better right to chip in?"

"You hadn't no right, anyhow. 'Cause you're sher'f, you mustn't think that you're goin' ter run th' hull burg."

"I have no desire to do so, Garry."

"It looks mighty like it. What did ye want ter interfere with us fer, then? We are th' voters o' this town, I want ye ter know, and we pays our taxes, too, and if a little lynch-law will save us some dollars, we're in favor of Judge Lynch, every time; hey, feller-citizens?"

"That's what we be, you bet. No measly mine-boss is goin' ter jump inter th' post o' Reg'lator o' Raspberry if we knows it."

The bully's loud mouth was drawing a crowd, and as the sheriff ran his eye over it he saw that it was about evenly balanced with the good and bad elements of the town.

Most of his posse, too, were on hand. If it came to a general fight he made up his mind that the bully's gang would get the worst of it.

"It strikes me, boys," he said, "that you are getting red-headed over nothing. You want to understand that this town, and the county, too, for that matter, is run on a simple foundation of law and order. Lynch-law is out of date. I have not set myself up to be 'Regulator of Raspberry,' as you have dubbed me, but you can bet your boots that you won't enjoy any lynching-bees while I am on deck."

"And you kin bet your own boots that you won't be on deck very long," yelled Bull, in something of a bellow that fitted well his name.

"It seems ter me, from th' way you are talkin' that you want ter fight, and if you do, jest trot yerself out here and I'll see what I kin do fer ye."

As he gave this invitation, the fellow squared off and put up his hands.

Sheriff Stillwood laughed at him.

"The best thing you can do," he advised, "is to go off about your work, and not get yourself into a sweat over my business. When I want any advice from you about how to run the office I hold, I will call around and let you know."

"Oh! ye will, will ye? D'ye hear how he's crowin', fellers? He is jest dyin' ter have somebody take some of th' starch out of him, and fer a single cent I'd do it."

"You'd better go slow about it," one cool-headed miner observed.

"Oh! I had, eh? Mebby you'd like ter take it up fer him."

"I opine he kin take keer of himself."

"Mebby he kin, among kids like you, but he's got a man ter attend to this time. He's set himself up ter run this hull town, an' we, th' citizens, don't perpose ter be run by nobody. When we git a murderer dead on th' hip, we're goin' ter lynch him, an' that settles it."

"I'm out of it myself," the miner returned, "but I say ag'in, you'd better go a leetle slow."

"Go slow ter blaze!" bellowed Bull. "Why, I reckon if we laid hands onter Night-time Nigel, this galoot would be fer givin' him a fair trial, as he calls it. The fairest thing he'd git would be a fair length o' rope, and I'm shoutin' on that!"

"He will certainly have a trial, and a fair one, if I am alive and in office when he is taken," Stillwood assured.

"Oh! he will, will he? Ye hear that, don't ye, fellers? He'd lock th' cuss up in th' jug, and give him a fair chance ter 'scape, instead o'

makin' short work o' him. That's th' sort o' gallus beauty he is!"

"Well, are you about done telling me about it?" the sheriff asked.

"Am I about done?"

"That is what I asked. You said you wanted a word with me, and it strikes me you have had it."

"Oh! it does, eh? Wal, now, somethin' else may strike ye, if ye git too fresh and funny. We didn't put ye inter office ter have ye put on lugs, an' think yerself a little Jupiter, or nothin' like that, we didn't."

"I didn't get the office by *your* vote, anyhow, sir."

"Oh! yer didn't?"

"No, sir."

"How d'ye know that?"

"You are one of the men who sold out for a dollar."

"You're a liar!"

"If it was worth while to do it, I'd cram that down your throat," Stillwood returned, with a little show of warmth. "I say that you did sell out for a dollar, but in saying that I don't want to leave the impression that it was Mr. Marsdon who bought your vote. It was Lance Guydon. I saw the transaction."

"Ha! what is that?" demanded another voice.

Turning his head, Stillwood saw Lancelot Guydon on the porch not a dozen feet away from him.

"I was just telling Mr. Garry here that I saw that little transaction between him and you on election day," the sheriff repeated.

"What transaction do you refer to, sir?"

"I refer to your buying his vote for a dollar."

Young Guydon's face was red, and his whole manner showed that it was the truth, and that it cut deep.

"And I say he's a liar!" yelled the bully again.

"Of course he is," agreed Guydon. "I demand that you take that back, sir," advancing toward Stillwood.

"Well, I hardly think I will," the sheriff retorted, easily. "It is the truth, and I can prove it."

"How can you prove it?"

"Dan Horton, Joe Russel, and Dick Terrell, all heard and saw the whole transaction. Isn't that so, Dan?"

"It's th' straight fact," Dan supported.

And the other two chimed in in the affirmative.

Jeers and hisses were heard from the crowd, for this was about as good proof as could be asked.

"I say it's a lie all th' same, though," bellowed Bull Garry again. "I don't do no sich biz as that, I don't an'—"

Dan Horton's revolver was under his nose.

"It's a lie, is it?" the deputy demanded.

"I ain't got no quarrel wi' you, Dan Horton," the bully evaded, "an' I—"

"No, but I've got one with you," insisted Dan. "You've got to take that lie back and swoller it, whole."

"Never mind him, Dan," Stillwood advised; "the proof is good enough."

"Yes, but he's got ter take it back, or he'll taste lead, that's all."

The deputy was not a big man, but he was full of grim grit, and that powder-smelling revolver right under the bully's nose spoke volumes.

"Wal, I take water on that," he growled, in a shame-faced manner, "but I kin lick you and th' sher'f, both tergether, fer money!"

CHAPTER XI.

STILLWOOD PROVES HIS CALIBER.

THAT part of the crowd that did not represent the bully's friends laughed.

The deputy had done what the sheriff himself had not thought it worth while to bother himself with.

Dan had made the fellow "take water" in the most approved style, and without any useless ceremony about it. But it did not look as though the matter would end there, for now "Bull" was bellowing worse than ever.

Young Guydon had dropped back out of the matter altogether, but there was a look of hatred upon his face.

"You don't want to be too free with your lip," Deputy Dan warned, as he stepped back and returned his revolver to his belt.

"Yas, I kin lick th' two of ye together," the bully yapped, "and you hear me proclaim it, too. No sher'f is goin' ter come th' king-bee racket over this town while yours truly is on deck, and that's what I'm shoutin'."

"You had better go along about your business, as Dan has warned you to do," observed Stillwood, "or you may get yourself into worse trouble."

"Haw, haw, haw!" the fellow laughed, "who will be likely ter give me wuss trouble, I'd like ter know? It won't be you, that you kin gamble on, fer I kin do you up in th' shortest kind of order. Whoop! I'm ripe fer a fight, I am, and if you are sp'ilin' fer a row, sher'f, all you have

got ter do is ter walk up to th' captain's office and settle accounts. You hear me yaup!"

"I am not looking for fight, as you call it," the sheriff returned. "I don't want to have any trouble with you or any other man. I want you to go along now, and leave me alone. I have got more serious business on hand than fighting."

This brought out a laugh from the bully and his backers.

They began to have the impression that the new sheriff was afraid.

"Got more serious business on hand, have, eh?" mocked the raging braggart. "I reckon you have got about th' most serious job of yer life right here. You have got ter lick me, or take a lickin', jest as it happens. I have stood about enough o' yer sass, and we'll have it out."

"Why, man, you are crazy," the sheriff still parleyed. "I am not imposing on you in any way; the shoe is on the other foot."

"Oh! it is, is it? Well, take that as a feeler!"

As he spoke the dirty scamp took a quid of tobacco from his mouth and flung it at the sheriff, striking him on the cheek.

Quick as a wink Stillwood's hand fell upon his five-shooter, but he refrained with an evident effort, from drawing it.

Bull Garry had probably never had a closer call for his life.

The crowd was now a big one. The bully's loud talking had brought everybody to the spot to learn what was going on.

Forcing himself to calmness, the sheriff brushed the tobacco from his cheek, and deliberately wiped the stain off with his handkerchief.

Garry was evidently surprised at this, for he had expected that he would have to defend himself the next moment.

Now he was sure that Stillwood was a coward.

"Ha! how d'ye like that?" he sneered. "Oh! I tell ye yo can't put on no lugs when I am around, and that's what's th' matter with Haner and all th' rest of th' fambly. Jest see him, fellers! He's as tame as a kitten! Why, if any galoot had done that to me I'd wipe—"

Just at that point his supply of air was cut off, temporarily.

With a sudden leap Stillwood had sprung down in front of him from the stoop, or porch, and his hand was at the fellow's throat.

Then, in the fraction of a second, as it seemed, as the bully opened his big mouth, the sheriff crammed his cigar down his throat, lighted end first, and pushed it down with his finger.

That done, he flung him away.

The boasting blower fell back among his friends, gasping for breath as he fell, and his first gasp carried the cigar all the way down.

But it did not long remain there.

The fellow yelled with pain, clawed at his throat, and in about a second he doubled up and unloaded his stomach of everything it held, cigar included.

Of course the sheriff's friends laughed heartily enough, and jeered the bully.

"How d'ye like that?" called out one.

"How's it set on yer stummick?" demanded another.

"Are ye satisfied now?" called out still another, and a hundred more such remarks were hurled at him.

But the fellow was not done yet.

Now he was thoroughly enraged, and as soon as he could get himself together he bellowed:

"Oh! but I'll have yer life fer that! I'll pummel ye till there won't be nothin' but pulp left! I'll chaw yer all up inter hash! I'll jerk ye limb from lockjaw, an' you'll think grim death has got after ye with a poker! I'll snatch ye—"

But he didn't.

He made a mad, blind rush, like the animal whose name he bore, with full intention, no doubt, of carrying out all he had threatened, but he had counted without his host.

When he came near enough, Stillwood made a quick move and grasped both the fellow's wrists in his hands, and with a sudden turn brought Mr. Bull to his knees with a groan.

"When you think you have had enough," he observed, quietly, "let me know."

"Oh! Ooh!" the fellow yelled in pain, as he got right down on his shins and squirmed desperately. "Let up! Oh! Let up, I say! You've got me foul— Ouch!"

The strength of the sheriff's arms seemed prodigious.

That he could hold such a giant of a fellow so easily, was astonishing.

"Beg my pardon, then," Stillwood ordered.

"Yes—yes, I begs yer parding!"

"Say that you're sorry for the insult."

"No, I'll be— Yes—yes! I'm sorry, sher'f!"

"Promise that you will be a better boy in future."

"Y—ye—yes! I'll be good— Oh! do let up!"

"And promise that you'll never interfere with my business again."

"I promise! I promise! Only let up!"

"Very well, sir, I'll let up, and see that you do behave yourself. I'll serve you worse, if I have occasion to go for you again."

With that, Stillwood let go of the fellow's arm and stepped back, and the rascal got upon his feet, rubbing his arms and still groaning.

"That wa'n't no fair," he complained. "You

got me foul, ye did, and that's how ye got th' best o' me. Ye couldn't 'a' done it in no other way."

"It makes no difference, so long as I made you take water."

"Yas," taking more courage, now that he was out of the sheriff's terrible grip, "but I ain't taken water fer good, I ain't. That's only one round. It'll take more'n one round ter lay out Bull Garry, and don't ye fergit it!"

"If you know when you are well off you will get right out, now, and let your head cool a little."

"I will, will I? We'll see about that."

The bully was getting the use of his arms, now, and he was more than ever inclined to fight it out.

With him it was now do or die. Defeat at the hands of the new sheriff meant loss of position to him, in the eyes of his followers, and he knew that now he must make a bold stroke to regain the ground he had already lost.

He put himself into fighting attitude, and advanced, sparring away in a very bantam-like manner, and shouting:

"Come on! you stuck-up dude of a sheriff! and we'll see who's best man! I'll show ye that ye won't have everything your way here in Raspberry. We'll see how th' new sheriff will look with a bu'sted nose and a pair o' swelled eyes. Come on, I say! or I'll lambaste th' stuffin' out of ye right where ye stand."

Stillwood backed away from him.

"You had better keep away," he warned.

"I don't want to fight you, and have no desire to do you an injury. I will, though, if you don't keep off."

"Haw, haw, haw! d'ye hear that, fellers? He don't want to do me an injury, he don't! That's one way o' tryin' ter squirm out of th' fuss ye've raised. You have got ter fight, you have; d'ye hear that? You have got ter fight, or else I'll paste it right to ye. Now defend yerself."

With that the foolish fellow rushed in and aimed a blow at the sheriff's face with his right fist.

That blow never reached its mark.

Quick as a flash the sheriff's left flew out, straight from the shoulder, and the fist met Mr. Bull's eye with a vicious spat, while that gentleman's fist merely grazed Stillwood's cheek.

And that was not all. There was a power behind that blow that was not thought of, and the bully reeled back and sat down ungracefully with a bump that jarred his whole body.

"When you are done," the sheriff coolly observed again, "just let me know."

There was a bellow that would have done credit to a genuine specimen of the male bovine.

Up the fellow got, in mad haste, and in he rushed again.

"Oh! but I'll show yer!" he yelled. "Jest let me git one swipe at her, and yer face will be on t'other side o' yer head! We'll see how much of a reg'lator of this town ye are! Yer can't do that ag'in, fer money! Jest see if ye kin."

The fellow talked big enough, but he was more wary in his attack than he had been at first.

He pranced around and around a good deal, and bade all kinds of defiance, but took care not to get too near.

Stillwood was standing calm and smiling.

"Quite a dancer, isn't he," he observed.

This brought out a roar of laughter, in which many of the bully's followers had to join.

"Yas, I kin dance, and I kin fight, too!" the enraged Bull screamed. "Keep yer top eye open, now, or I'll light on ye afore ye know it."

"Come on, I am waiting for you to light."

"Well, I'm comin' now."

The fellow thought he saw a good opening for attack, and he sprung in to take advantage of it.

When he arrived, so to say, the opening was not there.

Instead, Stillwood brushed aside his blows and pushed him back.

"I see you are determined to have it," the sheriff then observed, "so I may as well satisfy you. Come on, my raging bull."

Mr. Bull was coming.

He had never been seen in such a rage before, and had not Stillwood already shown a sample of his prowess the crowd would have thought that his time had come, perhaps.

The two came together like colliding locomotives, almost, but unlike them, damage was done only to one.

That one was the bully.

"Spat! Spat!" went the sheriff's fists, and at the last blow the fellow was lifted right off his feet and sent headlong in among his friends.

He fell to the ground, and there he lay.

Finally, when he found enough life left in him to enable him to sit up, he felt of his fast-swelling eyes and observed:

"Sher'f, we'll postpone th' rest of this fight till some other time, if it's all th' same ter you."

Great hoots and howls greeted this. Bull Garry had lost his place forever. Some one suggested three cheers for the sheriff, and three rousing shouts went up for "Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry!"

CHAPTER XII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

THE trouble over, the crowd melted away.

But the excitement over the murder had in no wise abated.

All work had been suspended during the forenoon, for the miners and other laborers had not thought of going to their daily toil.

And now in the afternoon the great majority still remained idle, and stood around in groups talking over the terrible crime that had been done in their usually orderly town—orderly as western towns go.

When the difficulty with Bull Garry had been settled, Sheriff Stillwood and Deputy Dan Horton walked away to the sheriff's office at the jail.

"I was a little afraid Bull would get away with you," Dan observed, as they set out from the hotel.

"And I was not altogether sure of victory," returned Stillwood. "He has had the name of being a bad man, but I did not find him so."

"Because you are a terror. I didn't think it was in you, but I'm glad it is. Now that they have seen what you can do, they will be more careful."

"I hope they will, for I don't want any trouble."

"You must look out for Bull, none the less. He may try to get at you in some foul way. I don't believe he's any too good to use a knife on a dark night."

"I shall try to keep my eye open for him."

"What do you think about this murder?"

"I don't know what to think about it. What is your opinion?"

"I hardly know. I can't believe that old man Oakbough is guilty."

"No, nor I. There is some mystery here."

"And how is it to be solved?"

"That is another sticker. I am no detective, though I wish I were. It will require a shrewd detective, to bring it out straight."

"And where is he to be found?"

"Oh! a professional detective can easily be procured. There are plenty of 'em in every city. The only thing is, to get one of reputation. A detective with a reputation to lose, will be worth twenty with reputations to make."

"That looks reasonable. I'm anxious to see the thing through."

"And so am I. We will do our best, and—But, hello! here we are at the office, and there is young Oakbough on the steps."

"Sure enough."

They went forward, and Francis Oakbough greeted Stillwood.

"I want to see father," he said, "and then want to have an interview with you. I want your advice in this awful matter."

"And you shall have it, if it is worth anything to you."

"I think it will be. Your jailer would not let me in; said you had given orders that no one should be admitted."

"So I did. I am responsible for the prisoner, you know, and I cannot afford to take chances of any sort."

"Can't blame you. But, let's go in. Come in with me if you will."

"I will do so, and then will leave you to talk in private."

"It is not necessary, for what I have to say can be said openly. Father may have something to say to me alone, however."

They passed through the office and into the jail proper, and on to the cell where Mr. Oakbough was confined.

The old gentleman was weeping aloud, and could be heard before the cell door was reached. That his grief was genuine was not to be doubted.

Stillwood unlocked the door of the cell, and Francis entered.

Mr. Oakbough looked up and greeted him. He also greeted Stillwood.

"Father," said the young man, "I have come to ask you a question or two."

"Very well, my son, what are they? Be sure that I will answer them if I can. Has the murderer been found yet?"

"Not unless you are guilty, and that is my first question: Are you indeed innocent of this crime?"

"Can you believe me otherwise?"

"No; but the force of circumstances is so strong against you."

"My son, I am innocent."

"Good. Now, do you suspect any one?"

"No one."

"Can you give me any clew to work on, in order to find the guilty person?"

"I only wish that I could."

"That is all I have to ask. I am going to employ a detective, and one of the best that money can procure."

"Who will it be?"

"I do not know yet. Rest assured that every effort shall be made to rescue you from your dangerous position."

"Well, go ahead, and do all you can for me."

Other things were talked of then, principally about the arrangements for the funeral of the

murdered wife, and finally the sheriff and young Oakbough left the cell and returned to the sheriff's office.

Stillwood threw himself into a chair, and invited his companion to be seated.

"I am glad of one thing," the sheriff observed.

"And what is that?" Francis asked.

"That you are innocent, in spite of your confession."

The young man smiled sadly.

"It was useless for me to declare that I was guilty," he returned.

"No one would believe it for a moment."

"I could not bring a single thing to the support of my story."

"And what was your object in making such a statement?"

"It was the impulse of a moment. I thought possibly I could save father from the disgrace of being imprisoned, and at the same time I wanted to offset my sister's unwise action."

"Then you believe her innocent, too, do you?"

"Why, of course, though she still protests that she is guilty. She acted, I am sure, upon an impulse, as I did. She saw father's danger, and hoped to draw it upon herself."

"It was unwise, as you say, for possibly it may be made to look more dark for her than at present, and her confession of the crime may work her great harm."

"That is what I am afraid. Heavens! What is the secret of it all?"

"I would that I could tell you. But, you wanted to see me; what can I do for you?"

"Are you anything of a detective?"

"I do not know. Have no reason to believe that I am."

"But you have said that you are willing to do all you can to help to establish my father's innocence."

"I promised Miss Oakbough, that I would do that, and I will. Whether my poor service in the case will prove of any value, remains to be seen."

"Then you agree with me that we should employ a detective?"

"By all means. Carry out your intention in that direction without delay. You can telegraph for one from Rixford. You had better send a messenger there to-day, with a telegram giving a brief explanation of what is required, and ask for the best help that can be sent."

"But, where shall I send?"

"Why not to San Francisco? In fact, I think that is the best place to send to. In two days we can have a man here and at work."

"And to whom shall I telegraph. I am unacquainted there."

"So am I, so far as the city's private detectives are concerned. Why not address the chief of police, and ask him to send the very best private detective he knows of?"

"That is the idea. I will do that."

And so it was arranged, and young Oakbough went away.

Within half an hour a trusted messenger was on his way to Rixford, with full instructions.

He was to await an answer, and then return to Raspberry with all haste.

During the remainder of the afternoon the excitement gradually subsided, and by night the town had assumed its way of usual even tenor.

Sheriff Stillwood had made a change in his lodging, however. He had removed to a room in the rear of the office at the jail, where he intended to remain while he had Mr. Oakbough in his keeping.

The office was a part of the jail building, and the building was a substantial one of stone and brick. The room in the rear of the office had a window that opened on a side street, the jail being on a corner. The front faced the main street of the town, and next to the court-house and the bank, the Raspberries pointed to the jail with a degree of pride worthy of mention.

Night settled down, finally, and the evening passed without event worthy of record.

At about ten o'clock Sheriff Stillwood paid his last visit to Mr. Oakbough's cell, to see that he was as comfortable as he could be made in such a place, and to ask if he wanted anything, and then he retired to bed in the room mentioned.

How long he had slept he did not know, but when he awoke he heard a tapping at the window.

Slipping out of bed, in the darkness, he stepped to the window and looked out.

He saw the outlines of a man.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"I'm a stranger to you," came the answer, in a tone just loud enough to be heard, "but I know something about the murder mystery. Let me into the office and I'll tell what I know."

"All right, go around to the door, and I'll let you in in a few moments."

Stillwood was wide awake now, and greatly interested.

Hurriedly putting on his clothes, and looking to his revolver to make sure that it was in condition for service, he took up the lamp he had lighted and went out into the other room.

Putting down the lamp on his desk, he unfast-

ened the door, and, with his revolver presented, opened it.

The man who faced him wore a half mask. "Keep the drop on me if you want to," he observed, carelessly, "but let me enter and sit down."

"Come right in, whoever you are," Stillwood invited, "and I'll do as you suggest regarding the drop."

The man entered, and Stillwood pointing with his revolver to a chair in the rear of the office, he crossed over and sat down.

Then the sheriff took a seat between him and the door, still holding the weapon in hand.

"Now," he demanded, "who are you, and what do you know about this crime?"

"Before I tell you who I am, sheriff, and what I know about the crime, I desire to ask a question."

"Very well, ask it."

"Do you think Byron Oakbough is guilty?"

"I do not think he is, though every circumstance is against him."

"How does he take the death of his wife?"

"In the hardest manner. He is broken down completely. His grief is genuine, too, if I am any judge."

"I am glad to hear you say that, for it has saved him a trial in the court of Judge Lynch."

"Our opinions may differ on that point," remarked Stillwood. "Now that I have answered your questions, it is but fair that you should answer mine. Who are you?"

"I am Nigel, the Outlaw."

CHAPTER XIII.

STILLWOOD BEAT AGAIN.

SHERIFF STILLWOOD was a surprised man. He doubted whether he was awake, almost. Could it be possible that this was the outlaw? It did not look reasonable. What protection had he?

"You do not mean it!" the sheriff exclaimed. "Nigel would never come in here and let me get the drop on him as I have got it on you."

"That's where you make your mistake, sheriff. I repeat, I am Nigel the Outlaw, and you can make the most of it. Keep your drop on me, whether you believe my statement or not."

"I intend to do so. You will not leave this room till I know more about you, you may depend on that."

"That's all right. I mean to let you know more about me."

"Have you anything more to ask?"

"Yes, I have, sir."

"Well, ask it."

"What is going to be done about this murder case?"

"Why, the same that is done in all such cases. Every effort is going to be made to get at the truth of the matter, and the murderer will be punished, of course."

"There is no suspicion against me, is there?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"That is a wonder. I get the credit of everything that goes wrong, whether I have a hand in it or not."

"Your reputation is not enviable, that's a fact."

"Well, be that as it may, I had no hand in this affair."

"These words from you will lead us to look in the direction of the outlaw."

"You still doubt that I am Nigel. Well, that can't be helped, and it don't particularly matter anyhow. You may look in my direction all you want to, sheriff, but remember the advice I gave you on the night of your election. Don't be too busy about my head."

"How do you expect to get out of my hands now?"

"That don't matter."

"I can shoot you where you sit, if I desire to do it."

"But you don't; you want me alive."

"Well, it looks as though I have you alive, don't it?"

"Appearances are deceptive, sometimes. But, my time is precious. I want you to tell me all about this murder, if you will be so kind."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because I ask it in a respectful way. I want to take a hand in this game myself, and want to understand the ground."

"You take a hand in it! What do you propose to do?"

"I want to see that murderer brought to justice."

"Then you will turn detective, eh?"

"I suppose it can be called that. Put a rascal to catch a rascal, you know."

"But, how about the two robberies of the Consolidated Mining Company's office, here, and the robbery of the bank and the murder of the watchman?"

"Those matters are all right. Look out they don't happen again before you are aware of it."

"We shall try to do that. What I was going to say, though, is, you are likely to be brought up to answer for these crimes, and many more, before you are aware of it, and you had better be a little wary how you play detective."

"When you get me, Stillwood, let me know it."

"I can't see why I haven't got you now. If you move a muscle I will send a bullet through your heart!"

The masked man laughed.

"Well, it does look as though you hold the best hand, and that's a fact," he admitted.

"You will find it out to be the fact," the sheriff assured.

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"My staying powers are good, and we'll sit right here till daylight, if necessary. I don't mean to lose my drop on you."

"A whistle from me would bring my men to my aid."

"Only to find you a dead man when they enter. Make one move, or give any kind of an alarm, and you die!"

It certainly did look as though the sheriff held the winning hand.

But he was uneasy. If this was really the outlaw he knew that there was some trick to appear that he was not looking for. It was not by any means reasonable to suppose that Nigel had put himself in his power without having arranged some plan for getting out again.

The outlaw only laughed again.

"I came here because I wanted to see you," he next said.

"That can be taken as a matter of course," responded the sheriff.

"I want to make a compact with you."

"Ha! you do, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what is it?"

"I want to help you in this case."

"What is your interest in the case?"

"That is something that I do not care to disclose now."

"Well, what manner of compact do you want to make?"

"I want you to agree to leave me alone till the murderer of Mrs. Oakbough has been discovered and arrested. Then you can go for me again as soon as you like."

"I won't agree to anything of the sort."

"Why not?"

"I am not making compacts with a thief and murderer, at present!"

The eyes behind the masks burned like shining points of steel.

"Hear me out, though," the man said.

"Well, go on."

"If you will come to such terms, it will enable me to act fearlessly in this neighborhood, and I can render you big help."

"I can't agree to your proposition at all."

"Then it is war to the knife?"

"It is, and nothing else. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, as the familiar saying has it."

"So I have heard, but then there is such a thing as the bird not being in the hand when you think he is. You think you have got me in your power, but I think otherwise."

"It remains to be seen who is right."

"True enough. How would you like to make a little bet?"

"I am not betting at present."

"You are hard to please, truly. It seems to me that we might make this game interesting in that way, somehow. For instance, I'll bet you a thousand dollars that you don't bag me this year."

"If I were betting at all I would bet you that amount that I have got you now. You are in the corner, and the door behind me is locked. Your men may be outside, but there is no way in which they can have a bead on me. As I said before, if you try to bring them to your help you will be a dead man when they arrive."

"Well, it looks bad, that's a fact, and I surrender. What do you want me to do?"

"Don't imagine that you are going to make me lose my drop on you by any amount of parley. We will stay right here."

"Very well, then, we'll settle down and take it comfortable."

With that the outlaw leaned back in his chair, interlocked his fingers in front of him, and was silent. But his eyes continued to blaze brightly through the mask he wore.

Stillwood was nonplused.

He knew that there was something back of this, but he did not know what to look for.

Now he began to doubt more and more that this was indeed the outlaw. He looked upon it as a bold play to promote some other object in view, but he was unable to guess what that other object could be.

Some minutes of silence passed, and the two men sat and stared at each other without moving.

Presently something happened. The sheriff's revolver and hand sunk down into his lap, and he seemed to become limp and helpless.

"Ha, ha, ha!" the outlaw laughed, moderately. "I have got him. This is a trick that he did not look for."

He got up and stepped over to where the sheriff sat.

"Helpless as a babe," he mused, "and I could take his life if I would. But I have no need to do it. I will give him one more warning, and then let him look out for me after that."

Taking a pencil from his pocket, he leaned over and wrote something on a sheet of paper that lay on the desk.

That done, he looked again at the sheriff, and his hand sought a weapon, as though he was still undecided whether to kill him or not.

"No," he decided, "if I do that he will never know of this joke, and it is too good for him to miss. I'll give him the chance, anyhow."

His hand left his pocket, and he turned to the door.

"Well, he has beat me a little at my own game, for I hoped to get the drop on him, instead of his getting it on me. I could not force the information I wanted to get about the murder. It is something to know that Oakbough is considered innocent, though, and it is well for him he is so considered."

He opened the door and passed out into the night.

When Stillwood awoke he started up suddenly and looked around in the greatest surprise.

The lamp was still burning, but sounds in the street told him that it must be daylight. He had his revolver in hand, and the recollection of the events of the night flashed upon him.

He was thoroughly amazed. How had he been overcome? Where was the outlaw now? What did it mean? What had taken place?

He thrust his revolver into his hip-pocket, and sprung to his feet. Going to a window, he threw it up and opened the heavy shutters. It was daylight indeed, and the street was busy.

"Well, this beats all I ever heard of!" he exclaimed under his breath. "How did the rascal overcome me? I remember I had him under cover of my revolver, and I remember his eyes looking out from the holes in his mask, and how bright they were— Ha! he must have mesmerized me!"

He had guessed the truth.

Turning back to the desk to put out the light, he found there the note the outlaw had left.

Taking it up, he read as follows:

"SHERIFF STILLWOOD:—

"You were in my power, and I could have killed you as easily as not. I give you one more warning, and if you do not heed, then look out for me. Do not try to run me to earth!"

"Yours in dead earnest,

"NIGHT-TIME NIGEL."

CHAPTER XIV.

NIGHT-TIME NIGEL'S NOTICE.

STILLWOOD crushed the paper in his hand with a growl.

He felt keenly the humiliation that had been put upon him.

It did not seem possible that the events of the night were true.

But, here was the proof of it all, and let it seem as it might, the facts were not to be rubbed out.

"I'll have him yet, though," the sheriff vowed, "and when I do get my grip on him, nothing but death for one of us shall take him."

He fully meant it, too, as any one could have told by the grim and determined expression of his face as he tore the note to bits and dashed them into the waste-basket at the end of the desk.

Just then the door opened, and Deputy Dan entered.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "what's the matter?"

"What d'ye see th' matter?" Stillwood snapped.

"Why, your face is like a rising storm."

"Then it shows my feeling to a tee, that's all."

"You have heard all about it, then?"

"About what?" and the sheriff looked up with quick interest.

"Why, Nigel has been here again."

"And what has he done this time? Come, spit it out, for I have heard nothing about this."

"Why, he has left his name on almost every door of importance in the town. It is here on this door— See?"

As he spoke the deputy flung the door wide open, and, sure enough, there, in chalked letters, were the words:

"MURDERER OF MARION OAKBOUGH,
TREMBLE!"

"NIGHT-TIME NIGEL."

Here was mystery with a vengeance.

What had the outlaw to do with the matter?

"What other doors is this notice found on?" Stillwood asked.

"Most all of any importance, as I said before," answered Dan. "It is on the door of the post-office, hotel, bank, court-house, saloons, church and others. He was bound to take in everybody, saint and sinner alike."

"So it seems. This matter is growing big, Dan, it strikes me. What interest can that outlaw, thief, murderer and what-not, have in it?"

"You will have to ask me something easier than that."

"Well, I saw him last night."

"Saw him?"

"Yes, saw him. Sit down and I'll tell you about it."

They took seats, and the sheriff related his night's experience. And when he had done the deputy gave out in a rapid and excited

"I don't tell it because I can boast of my part in it," Stillwood added, "but I tell it to warn you to look out for the same trick. You can post the rest of the men, but you needn't tell them what I have revealed to you."

"No, certainly not. Well, he is a bad one, and no mistake. No wonder that he is the terror of the county."

"It must be our business to bring his career to a close."

"And we'll do it if it's in the wood!"

"Mind, no mention of this."

"All right."

Dan took his leave, and when Stillwood had washed, and had visited his prisoner, he set out for the hotel to get breakfast.

Excited crowds thronged the streets, and the notices on the doors attracted the attention of all.

The sheriff's attention was called to every one he had to pass.

"Hey! what d'ye think o' this?" was the demand here; and:

"Jest cast yer eye at that!" was the exclamation there.

To all of these the sheriff made some reply, but did not stop.

His mind was busy, and that adventure with the outlaw, when he had had him at his mercy, as he fully believed, was galling him sore.

The first salute he got when he entered the hotel was from Ulysses Burbank, the new mine superintendent, who was in conversation with Lancelot Guydon.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "you slept too late to get your man this time, sheriff. He has been and gone."

"Yes, so I see," Stillwood returned, carelessly.

"And it seems he is going to lend you his friendly assistance in hunting down the murderer of Mrs. Oakbough," added young Guydon.

"So his message seems to indicate."

"Probably thinks you need all the help you can get."

Stillwood paid no attention to the intended thrust, but passed on into the breakfast-room.

While he was there he was joined by Francis Oakbough.

They exchanged greetings, and Francis asked:

"How is father this morning?"

"About the same," the sheriff answered. "I guess he slept some, but he looks haggard and worn."

"And no wonder. I hope this mystery will soon be cleared up, and that he will be set at liberty. It will prove his death, if he has to remain there."

"I certainly hope as you do," returned Stillwood. "We can only look for the best, and do all we can to establish his innocence. By the way, has your man returned from Rixford yet?"

"No, he has not yet put in an appearance, and I am growing anxious about him. He ought to have been here by this time."

"I should think so, but there may have been some delay about getting an answer to the message."

"Yes, that's so."

They talked on, and when Stillwood had finished his breakfast they went out together.

"Anything new about th' murder mystery, gentlemen?" asked Josh Hubbard, when they passed into the bar-room.

"Nothing, so far, landlord," the sheriff responded.

"Wal, it is a 'tarnal puzzle, and no mistake."

"It is nothing else."

Stillwood lighted a cigar, and they passed on out to the porch.

As they stepped out the door they saw a horseman coming down the valley.

"Ha! there he is now!" young Oakbough exclaimed.

"Your messenger?"

"Yes."

The horseman came on at a swinging canter, and drew up at the hotel porch.

"Well, here I am at last, Mr. Oakbough," he greeted.

"What detained you?" Francis asked.

"Well, the answer was a long time a-coming, in the first place, and then I was held up by Night-time Nigel."

"The deuce you were!" exclaimed Stillwood.

"Where did he meet you?"

"About twenty miles from here, on the south trail."

"Did he rob you of the message?" asked Oakbough.

"No; but he made me hand it over, and he opened and read it."

Dan Horton had just come up, and he and Stillwood exchanged glances.

There was something that gave them both the same thought, something in this that seemed to indicate that the outlaw must have a spy at Raspberry.

"How did he know that you had such a message with you?" Stillwood asked.

"I give it up," the messenger replied.

"Did he ask you for it, right out, or did he first learn from you that you had such a paper on your person?"

"He asked for it right out plump."

"Well, that is strange. Tell us what passed between you."

"It is soon told. He met me just this side of Big Cliff, and the first I knowed of his presence was when he sung out 'Hands up!' I put 'em up, of course, out of customary politeness, and then he demanded:

"Which pocket have you got that telergram in?"

"What telergram?" sez I."

"Come," sez he, 'no foolin'. I happen to know that you went to Rixford to telegraph fer a detective, and I'm interested ter know what answer you are takin' back ter Raspberry."

"I tried ter lie to him, but he wouldn't have it that way. He threatened to go through all all my pockets, if I didn't tell him mighty quick, so I owned up. Then he took th' telergram, opened it, read it by th' light of a cigar he was smokin', and when he had done he gev it back to me and told me ter amble along. That's th' hull of it, and here I am."

As he concluded he took the telegram from his pocket and handed it over.

It had been opened, true enough.

Young Oakbough read it in silence, and then passed it over to the sheriff for him to see.

"Then the man has started already," Stillwood observed.

"Yes, according to that."

"And will probably be here within forty-eight hours."

"Yes."

"Well, I am glad of it, and, as the chief says, the man sent is reliable, I believe we shall soon be on the right track."

"I hope so, at all events."

That day passed without excitement, that is to say, without any new excitement, and on the following day the funeral of the murdered woman took place.

It was a funeral that was largely attended, for Mrs. Oakbough had been greatly liked in the town of Raspberry, where she had resided ever since her marriage to Mr. Oakbough, four years before.

She was a young woman, not more than half Mr. Oakbough's age, and, handsome, as she has been described.

But little was known concerning her, further than that she was from Chicago.

Not that there had been any reticence, seemingly, but no had one made any inquiries.

Mr. Oakbough was permitted to attend the funeral, in company with Sheriff Stillwood, and his genuine grief won for him the sympathy of everybody.

The only absent member of the family was Rhoda Oakbough.

And this action on her part called forth a murmur of suspicion that perhaps her confession was genuine after all.

If she was indeed the murderess, her reason for not attending the funeral was plain. Having confessed her guilt, she would not be likely to follow the body of her victim to the grave.

The funeral passed off quietly and orderly, and the body was laid to rest in the pretty little cemetery at the foot of the valley.

After all was over, and Mr. Oakbough was taken back to the jail, he sunk upon the stool in his cell with a groan.

"Bear up, Mr. Oakbough," Stillwood tried to cheer.

"I can not," was the sad response.

"We intend to move the world, if necessary, to establish your innocence."

"That matters little, to me, now. Only for the shame it would leave upon my son and daughter, I would say let them hang me."

"No, no, sir, you must not speak that way. We believe that you are innocent, at any rate I do, and you must live to see the murderer of your wife meet his deserving death on the gallows."

"Ha! that is true. I must indeed see him meet his merited doom!"

From that hour Mr. Oakbough took courage, and the one thought of seeing vengeance meted out to the slayer of his fair young wife seemed to lend him strength.

CHAPTER XV.

INNOCENT? OR GUILTY?

PERHAPS the fairest girl in Raspberry was Imogene Clayport.

She was the only child of a widowed mother, who held the post-office of the town.

Imogene was about twenty-two years of age.

She was above the medium height, graceful of carriage, and refined. She was educated to a fair degree, and was respected and liked by everybody.

Rhoda Oakbough had only one bosom friend in all Raspberry, and that one was Imogene Clayport.

The two were firm friends, and almost constant companions.

At any rate they had been such up to the time of the murder of Mrs. Oakbough.

And there was no alteration now, so far as Imogene was concerned. There had appeared a shadow of coldness, however, on the part of Rhoda.

What it could be, Imogene could not guess.

It pained her more than she would allow herself to acknowledge, and she had made up her

mind that as soon as the funeral was over, she would find out the reason for it.

Not that Rhoda had treated her unkindly, but she had not shown her that affection which they had hitherto expressed for each other.

On the evening of the day of the funeral, Imogene called at the Oakbough home and asked for Rhoda.

She had been in the habit of going in without any formality, but now, she hardly knew why, she knocked and waited for the door to be opened, and it was Joan Reytol who responded and of whom she inquired for Rhoda.

"She is in her room," Joan said; "go right up."

Imogene did so, but not without a shudder as the thought of the recent murder came upon her.

Tapping at Rhoda's door, she was told to enter.

She found her friend in a low rocker near one of the windows, and her eyes and face showed that she had been weeping.

Imogene paused a moment, without intention, almost, as though to see what her greeting was to be.

The pause was only of a second's duration, however, when, thinking that it might give a wrong impression, she went quickly forward, with outstretched arms, and embraced Rhoda, saying:

"I have come to share your grief, dear friend."

Rhoda pushed her gently away, and her tears burst forth anew.

"Do not touch me, Imogene," she sobbed.

"Sit down, if you will, but do not touch me. Think of the crime I have done!"

"Do you still foolishly assert that you did the awful deed?"

"Foolishly assert!" Rhoda exclaimed; "it is the truth! Will no one ever believe me?"

"I will never believe that you did it, Rhoda."

"Then why should I confess that I did it?"

"I do not know. If I did, perhaps I would know— But, I must not say that."

"You must not say what? What were you about to say?"

"You'll not be offended with me?"

"No, for I love you too well."

"Oh! I am so glad to hear you say that!" Imogene cried, and in spite of the repulse she had met with before, she embraced her friend again.

This time Rhoda did not push her away.

"Are you still my friend, even though my hands are stained with blood?" she asked.

"I am your friend forever!" Imogene exclaimed.

"But, what did you mean by what you said?"

"I was about to say that, if I could know why you are taking this crime upon yourself, I would know who the real murderer is."

"Then you believe that I am taking it upon myself to shield the real criminal, do you?"

"I cannot help thinking that."

"It is not so, dear Imogene. I, and I alone, am the wretched being who took that woman's life."

"I can not—I will not—believe it!"

"But I assure you again that it is true. If I would admit the truth to any one, if it were otherwise—if it were as you suspect, would it not be to you?"

"I believe you would trust me, and I assure you that you can trust me, but I will not believe that you are guilty."

"And will no one else believe it?"

"I am afraid that there is a turn in public opinion, and that the tide is setting in against you."

Rhoda seemed to brighten up, and seemed to be on the point of uttering an exclamation, but checked herself.

"It is time that my story began to have some weight," she observed, simply.

"And I am afraid that it means danger for you, unless you own to the truth," her friend added.

"Danger to me! Why should it not mean danger to me? Should my poor father be permitted to suffer for my crime? Heaven forbid!"

Rhoda's manner was so earnest that Imogene paled.

After all, was she guilty? Were her fair hands indeed stained with the blood of a human being—even that of her father's wife?

Rhoda was quick to see the impression her words had made.

"You are beginning to believe me," she said.

"I am wondering if it is possible, if you really— But, no! I will not allow myself to believe it."

"Then you prefer to believe that I am telling my best friend a lie?"

"Better that than the other."

"Well, whether you believe it or not, it is the truth. I am the one that took that woman's life. I wish I had more proof to show than I have."

"You have not as much as appears against your father."

"I know it. And to think that that proof

against him was established by my own blind stupidity!"

"Will you tell me all about the crime, since you acknowledge that you did it? You cannot know how deeply concerned in it I am."

"I can see that you want to pick some flaw in it that will prove my story to be false, Imogene, but you cannot do that. The truth will stand the test. Yes, I will tell you all about it."

And Rhoda did so, going over all that has been made known to the reader.

"But, why did you hate her so?" Imogene asked.

"That is something that I do not want to tell."

"You will be made to tell it at your father's trial—you may be obliged to tell it in order to save him."

"It will be time enough then, if it comes to that."

"Well, what was your object in choosing that particular time for your crime? Why did you not take a time when suspicion would have fallen upon no one in the house, and least of all upon him?"

"I believe I acted upon sudden impulse."

"It is rather strange, to say the least. And, too, how did you expect to do the deed without any weapon?"

"Perhaps my intention was to strangle her."

"But, seeing the knife on the chair, you used that instead."

"Yes, I suppose— Yes, of course."

"And the thought did not come to you that perhaps your father would be thought guilty of the crime?"

"Not until it was too late."

"It is strange, very strange, and, pardon me for saying it, Rhoda, dear, but I do not believe a word you have told me."

"I cannot help it."

"You and your step-mother were ever the best of friends, so far as I could see, and this change in your feelings must have been very sudden."

"I believe I have not said that it was not."

"And what could have produced such a hatred in so short a time?"

"That is the part that I decline to disclose. I will only disclose it as a last resort."

"But, suppose your father gets off free, then will you still protest that you are guilty?"

"I could not then take back what I have made known."

"But, you could deny it, and say that your object was to save him."

"No, no! Never! That would give the impression that I have reason to think him guilty—or worse, that I know he is guilty. Oh, no! that would never do!"

"Suppose, though, that the real assassin is caught, how about it then?"

Rhoda smiled sadly.

"You would lead me into a trap, were I innocent, as you would have me," she observed.

"But it is useless. I am guilty, and you had better cast me out from your affection and friendship for once and all."

"Never! Even should they find you guilty, I will still believe you innocent, and you can count upon my friendship to the end."

At that moment there came a tap at the door.

Rhoda spoke, and Joan Reytol entered the room.

"Sheriff Stillwood is below, and wants to see you, Miss Rhoda," she said.

Both the young ladies sprang to their feet, and Rhoda cried:

"Great heavens! he means to arrest me!"

She was as white as death, and trembled violently.

"Is that not what you desire?" asked Imogene, though she was scarcely less agitated.

Rhoda grew calmer immediately, and turning to the servant, directed:

"Just ask him if he is here to arrest me. If so, I will come down prepared to go with him to the jail."

The woman turned away, and the girls waited in silence for her to come back.

She was not gone long.

"He has no thought of arresting you," she reported.

Imogene was looking at Rhoda, but she could not decide whether the momentary change that passed over her countenance denoted disappointment or relief.

"You will go down with me?" Rhoda questioned, turning to her.

"If you desire it."

"Please come, then."

Sheriff Stillwood rose to greet them, when they entered the parlor.

When greetings had been exchanged, he said:

"I have called to ask if there is anything more you can tell us, Miss Oakbough, in regard to this mystery that is baffling us all."

"I can only repeat what I have asserted a hundred times," the young lady returned.

"And that is—"

"That I am the guilty person."

The conversation that ensued was so similar to that that had just passed between the two girls, that it need not be quoted.

In half an hour the sheriff rose to take his leave.

"Were you about going when I came, Miss Clayport?" he inquired.

"I think I will go now," Imogene answered.

"Then, as I am going your way, it will be a pleasure to see you safely home."

Imogene was in nowise adverse to the arrangement, and when she had taken an affectionate leave of Rhoda the two set out.

CHAPTER XVI.

A PROPOSAL REJECTED.

JOHN STILLWOOD and Imogene Clayport were lovers.

No one, however, besides themselves, knew that the tender passion burned in their breasts.

As soon as they were out of the house, Stillwood made a confession.

"Imogene," he said, "my errand to the Oakbough house was to see you."

"Indeed!" with a show of surprise that was a good deal pretended.

"Yes, to see you. I want your help in the work of sifting this great mystery. There is a certain part that I believe you can play, and if you are successful it will score a big point."

"I am willing to help all I can, of course. I am more than willing, for the guilty one must be found!"

"Then you agree with me that Rhoda Oakbough is innocent?"

"I can never believe her otherwise."

"So much the better. You can do what I want you to do, and easily."

"What is it?"

"I want you to lead Rhoda to confess to you that she is innocent."

"Impossible!"

"What?"

"I say it is impossible. I tried for half an hour to do that very thing, before you came in."

Sheriff Stillwood muttered something that might have been taken for a mild imprecation.

"That knocks it all in head," he declared. "I was talking with Francis, and we were trying to think of some plan by which we could lead her to confess to some one that she is innocent. I thought of you. You are her dearest friend, I believe, and if she would reveal the truth to any one, it would be to you. We planned that if you and she were together for a time, she would confess the whole truth to you, and witnesses could be in hiding to overhear her words."

"It would be hardly an honorable course, would it, John?"

"It would not be dishonorable, in such a matter as this. If she is trying to shield the real criminal, we ought to know it. If she has reason to suspect that her father is the murderer, we ought to know that."

"Well, it will be useless for me to try it, for I have done so already."

"And she still insists that she is guilty?"

"Yes, positively."

"It is puzzling."

"It is something that is simply incomprehensible. What can her reason be for saying that she is guilty, if she is innocent? And if she is guilty, why can she not make it plain to everybody?"

"She cannot prove what is not true. She is no more guilty than her brother. He confessed to the same the other day, but he had to own to the false statement, and tell why he had made it."

"What reason did he give?"

"He hoped to shelter his father from arrest, and at the same time offset the confession his sister had made."

"Do you think it possible that Francis can be the murderer?"

Instantly Stillwood stopped.

"Do you think he can?" he counter-questioned.

"The thought just came to me. If he is the murderer, and Rhoda is aware of it, will not that account for her action in the matter?"

They went on, and for some moments Stillwood was thoughtful.

"There is something in that thought," he owned, "but I cannot credit it. I have looked upon Francis Oakbough as a very honorable fellow. Even were he guilty, it does not seem reasonable that he would let his father and sister bear the suspicion."

"I do not know about that. Mind, though, I do not want it thought that I am inclined to think him guilty. If he could commit such a crime, he would be capable of anything else."

"There seems to be no doubt about that, but, where there is so much of a mystery about a matter, it is hard to know how to decide."

"Well, I am sure of one thing, and that is that Rhoda is innocent. And I can say almost the same for Francis and Mr. Oakbough."

"That household was a happy one, was it not?"

"It was, so far as I was ever able to judge."

"And no one ever had a better chance to form a correct opinion. But, here we are at your home, and I must bid you good-night."

So they parted, after a few more remarks, and the sheriff went on toward the jail.

He was as greatly puzzled as ever—even more

so. If Rhoda Oakbough insisted to her nearest and dearest friend that she was guilty, what was to be thought of it?

Mystery, mystery!

He went on, and to his office.

In the mean time, when Imogene entered the house she found a caller awaiting her return.

It was Mr. Lancelot Guydon.

Mrs. Clayport, as has been said, kept the post-office. In connection with that she had a little store, where she sold collars, cuffs, and other things in the same line, and stationery.

The little store fronted on the street, and the sign—

"POST-OFFICE"

was on the window.

Just in the rear of the office was a sitting-room, and it was here that young Guydon was found, talking to Mrs. Clayport.

He rose and greeted Imogene in his best manner, a greeting which she returned with only polite civility.

"Mr. Guydon has been waiting some time to see you," the mother remarked.

"Though the time has seemed short, so well have I been entertained," was the gallant rejoinder.

"I have been over to see Rhoda, you know," Imogene explained, speaking to her mother.

Passing remarks were made on that, and when there was a pause, Guydon observed:

"In the face of all the excitement we have been having of late, it was not to be thought that you would remember your engagement with me, Miss Clayport. Still, in order to be prompt, I am here at the time agreed upon. I assure you that it could not pass by me unnoticed. I have been counting the hours."

The face of the young lady changed color, and her eyes sought the floor.

"You know you promised an answer to my question to-night, Imogene. I am here to receive it. My happiness is in your hands."

Silence.

The silence continued, and it became an awkward pause.

"Mr. Guydon is waiting," Mrs. Clayport gently reminded.

At this Imogene looked up, her face slightly pale, but its expression determined.

"I am prepared to give you your answer, Mr. Guydon," she said, "but it is not the answer you hoped for. The answer is— No."

Guydon paled to the lips.

"You refuse me!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I refuse you. I can not become your wife."

"You—you had better reconsider that," the young man exclaimed, warmly. "I am not inclined to accept that as final."

"It has been reconsidered, sir, and you must accept it. It is my final answer to your offer."

Mrs. Clayport looked on in a manner that seemed to speak displeasure at this refusal on the part of her daughter to accept the offer of marriage that had been made her by so wealthy a man as the son of Lawrence Guydon, the mine-owner and manager.

"You do not know what you are doing!" Lancelot cried.

"I know perfectly well, sir."

"And you refuse me—me, probably one of the wealthiest men in all this county of Raspberry."

"Your wealth has had no weight in the matter, Mr. Guydon. Did I love you, I would marry you if you were a laborer."

"Well, you are frank about it, anyhow. I presume there is some 'laborer' who has been more successful in effort to capture your heart. But, I do not give up yet, Imogene Clayport. I have your mother's consent, and I mean to make you my wife, sooner or later."

"You need not have any further thought about it, sir. I have given my final answer, and it will not be changed."

Lance Guydon was in a rage, and it was all he could do to contain himself.

He had not dreamed it possible that this girl, poor as she was, would seriously think of rejecting his suit.

But she had, much to his surprise and chagrin.

"We will see about that!" he retorted, and then with a "good-night" that was scantily polite, he hurried out.

"Curse her!" he hissed, as soon as he was out of doors, "but I will tame her a little! She shall be my wife, and that before she is aware of it, too. If she is not willing, then let her be unwilling, that is all."

He went on to the office of the mine, where he entered and flung himself into a chair to cool off.

When he had gone from Mrs. Clayport's house, that woman turned to her daughter and exclaimed:

"Imogene, I am surprised!"

"I do not know why you should be, mother," was the smiling response, and the young lady's manner was now all affection toward her mother.

"But I am, though," the mother persisted. "I am surprised that you should refuse so good

an offer. You may never have another like it."

"I hope that I shall not."

"Why do you speak like that? Mr. Guydon is, as he says, rich, and that ought to weigh heavily with a poor girl like you."

"But it does not. He is rich I know, but he is not honorable, and I do not love him even a little bit. So, mother dear," with a merry laugh, "let us drop the matter once for all, and never let it come up again."

"He still insists that he will have you, though, and he certainly has my consent to marry you."

"But, you know he cannot do it without mine, and that he will never have."

"Well, I am sorry, for I was in hopes that brighter days were dawning for us, and that our poverty was at an end."

This caused Imogene to become sad in manner immediately.

"I love you, mother," she said, "you know I do, but I cannot agree to bring you wealth at such a price. We are comfortable here, and while we have each other, let us be happy together."

They embraced, and the mother kissed her child, but it was plain to be seen that she did not fully appreciate the sentiment that left them still in poverty and lowly position.

"It would not be so hard, if we had not been rich once," she sighed, "but, we will say no more about the matter for the present."

"And for all time, I hope," added Imogene.

CHAPTER XVII.

RASPBERRY'S CURIOSITY ROUSED.

THE daily stage from Rixford had not arrived.

Its usual time was six o'clock in the evening.

It was now after nine, and it had not yet put in an appearance.

Four hours late was something entirely unusual, and the crowd around the various saloons, stores, and the hotel and post-office, was beginning to grow eager to know what had happened.

"It's Night-time Nigel ag'in, that's what it is," declared Bull Garry, in front of the hotel.

And he voiced the sentiment of a big portion of the crowd.

"If it is, he must 'a' made a hearse of th' hull thing," declared another man of about the same brand.

"And whar's th' great reg'lator o' this burg, that he ain't out ter find out what's th' matter?" the "Bull" bellowed.

Sheriff Stillwood had not paid any attention to the arrival or non-arrival of the stage, and was not aware that it had not come till Dan Horton told him.

And this was at the jail, about the time that Garry was calling for him in the street.

"What! you say the stage is not yet in?" Stillwood demanded.

"Not a wheel of her," Dan affirmed.

"This must be looked into. Not that it is any particular business of ours that I know of, but if there is trouble of any kind we may help the stage out of it."

"So I was thinkin' when I came down to tell you."

They went out and walked up to the hotel.

"Hello!" Bull Garry yelled as they approached, "here is th' great man o' th' burg now! Say, sher'f, th' dead-wagon ain't in yet; did ye know it?"

"So I have just been told," Stillwood answered, as he passed on and into the hotel.

"Have you seen anything of Brown?" he asked of old Josh.

Brown was something of an under-superintendent of the stage line.

"He was here a bit ago," the landlord answered, "an' I opine he went out ter see about sendin' help ter find th' stage."

"Good enough. That takes it off my hands. Thought I would go, with some of my men, if necessary."

Just then the sheriff heard his name called, and looking up, saw the stage-boss entering the room.

"You are th' man I want to see," he exclaimed. "Can you let me have a couple of men to go out with me to find the stage?"

"I guess I can," Stillwood answered, and turning to some of his men who were there, he picked out two of them and told them to get ready and go.

In a little time they were off.

It was an hour and a half later when the stage finally swung down into the valley and into the town and came to a halt at the hotel porch.

"Whoa!" sung out the driver. "Heur we be, at last, though it did look mighty much like we wasn't goin' ter git here a tall."

"What's happened?" was the demand from every quarter.

"Oh! Night-time Nigel, ye may be sure."

Excitement ran high then, and to follow the many remarks, questions, answers, and what-not, would be to exceed by far the limits of a chapter.

The facts were easily summed up, when once they had been given.

Brown, and the men with him, had found the stage about eight miles from the town, at a bad place on the road, with three of the horses shot dead and with two dead passengers on top.

The stage had been stopped there by the outlaw and a part of his band, and a fight had taken place.

But so hot had it been made for the rascals, by two of the inside passengers, that they had been obliged, finally, to run away, taking three of their number with them in a badly-wounded, and perhaps dying, condition.

"Yas, there we war," declared the driver, "an' thar we stayed, for I supposed we'd git help from here sooner or later, though it turned out ter be a mighty sight later nor soon. But, heur we be; and now, you insides, thar, tumble out!"

But the door was already opening, and a slender foot touched the step and a strikingly beautiful face appeared.

The foregoing explanation of what had happened had taken but a few moments of time.

The woman alighted, and after a brief and cool glance around at the crowd, ascended the steps of the hotel.

"Thar, citizens o' Raspberry," sung out the driver, pointing to her with his whip, "thar goes th' bravest bit o' female beauty in th' hull West, and I am bettin' money on it. If she didn't jest pepper them outlaws with lead, then you kin pepper me! You'd 'a' thought she was armed with a double-actin' Gatlin' gun, th' way her poppers kept a-poppin', ye would!"

All eyes were upon the beautiful woman, who paid no further attention to any one, but entered the house by the hall door.

Three men followed her out of the stage, but there was nothing to indicate that they had anything in common with her.

One of the men was a short, thick-set fellow, clad in a neat business suit of dark material.

He looked to be about forty years of age, and had a grim, determined face.

With the rest of the passengers, he entered the bar-room.

"And here's another job fer yer crowner," announced the driver, calling attention again to the dead men on top. "Poor fellers, they got picked off at about th' first fire, and they never kicked. Reckon I'd 'a' shared th' same fate, but as soon as th' ball opened, yours truly tumbled off out o' range, post-haste."

"Then they made nothing out of you this time, eh?" some one asked.

"Nary a thing, not even th' mail-bag. Here's that article, by th' way."

The driver flung out the mail-bag, and then with the help of others the two dead men were taken from the top and laid out on the porch.

They were evidently miners, to judge by their dress, and were unknown at Raspberry. And, as they will not be mentioned again, it may be said here that an inquest was held, later, on and their deaths were scored against the outlaw. In the morning they were buried.

But, to return.

When the stage had been driven around to the stables, the crowd dispersed to various quarters, many of them entering the bar-room of the Seven Stars.

Here were Sheriff Stillwood, Dan Horton, Lancelot Guydon, Ulysses Burbank, and others.

Brown, the stage-line boss, proceeded to give the particulars of the fight more in detail, as he had gained them from the driver.

According to the evidence shown, the victory over the outlaws had been due more to the beautiful lady passenger than to any one else. She had fired the first shot at them, the moment that the stage was stopped, and had continued to fire until they ran away.

It was Night-time Nigel's first defeat!

"Yes," vouched the short, thick-set stranger who had been one of the passengers, and who had registered as Ward Wyman, "the victory was due to the lady, and no mistake on that point. She is as brave as she is beautiful."

"Who is she?" was asked.

"I cannot tell you, gentlemen."

"Where is she from?"

"I cannot tell you that, either. She got off the night train at Rixford, or the afternoon train, to be more precise."

"Well, we'll know somethin' about her here after she registers, anyhow," commented Burbank. "I am interested in pretty women, every time."

"Right here, too," added Guydon.

The talk went the rounds, and various remarks and comments were made, and all waited with more or less eagerness for old Josh, the landlord, to go in and look after his lady guest.

Finally, when the landlord had time to do so, he left the bar-room, taking the hotel register with him, and went into the other side of the office, or the office proper.

This part of his establishment was seldom called into use, so the bar-room answered the double purpose.

He was gone some minutes, and when he returned most of the crowd moved forward to get a look at the register.

"Who is she, Josh?" asked one.

"She's a stunner, that's who, fer one thing," the landlord exclaimed; "and she is rollin' in

wealth fer another. It would 'a' been a rich haul fer th' outlaw, and that I'm tellin' ye. Why, she's loaded down with ready money, and her diamonds are like a house afire, so duzzlin' they are."

"But her nama, what's her name?"

The landlord dropped the register on the bar and opened it.

"Thar it is, in black an' white," he said.

As it happened, the stranger, Ward Wyman, was the first to make it out, and he spoke the name aloud.

The lady had registered:

"YSEULT,

"The Queen of Sheba."

"Is it possible!" the stranger exclaimed, as soon as he had spoken the name. "Yseult, the Queen of Sheba, here!"

"Who in merry thunder is she, anyhow?" demanded the landlord. "Dang me if it ain't a startler of a name."

So everybody else seemed to think.

The crowd pressed yet closer, and all waited upon the words of the stranger.

"She is a stranger to me," Mr. Wyman remarked, "but I have heard of her. She is a gambler queen, and I guess this is her first appearance in this part of the country. If all is true that I have heard of her, she will show you some high-art gambling, if you have any lovers of the fickle dame, Fortune, here."

"Well, she'll find that we have," spoke up Lancelot Guydon. "We have men in this town who can get as many aces out of a single pack as the next one."

"No doubt she will give you all a fair chance to reduce her capital."

"We'll try it, just for the fun of the thing, anyhow," declared Burbank.

The odd name passed from lip to lip, and within half an hour it was known all over town wherever men were congregated.

But the hour was now late, and after the mail had been sorted and distributed, the town gradually quieted down.

The saloons were the last to close, a way saloons have, but finally they, too, were darkened, and at one o'clock the town was in slumber.

It was three o'clock in the morning when that slumber was rudely broken. A great shouting was heard in the street, a rattling volley of pistol-shots was heard in connection, and with these sounds was mingled the heavy thunder of many hoofs. Windows were hastily thrown open, and all who looked out beheld, in the dim light, a number of masked horsemen dashing through the town.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DETECTIVE AT WORK.

MANY of the citizens rushed out.

By the time they gained the street, however, the noise had ceased, and the horsemen were out of sight.

But the town had been thoroughly awakened, and it was generally agreed that this was the dreaded outlaw and his band again.

Some few shots had been sent after them, by watchmen on duty, but it did not appear that any of them took effect.

Raspberry had now quite a number of these night-watchmen on duty, since the last robbery of the mining-office.

The citizens did not mean to give Nigel another chance to spoil them.

As soon as morning dawned the town was astir.

"Bull" Garry was out as early as the earliest, and bellowing:

"Whar is our sher'f?" he demanded. "Why wasn't he out ter bag th' outlaws? He's a healthy dude, he is, ter be sher'f."

And then he began to sing:

"Whar, oh! whar is our dude sher-ref?"

"Whar, oh! whar kin he be?"

"Nigel has been heur, an' he is left;

"Whar, oh! whar is he?"

This was bellowed, or howled, to the tune of "Snyder's Dog," and it seemed to tickle the rowdy element of the crowd greatly.

A general laugh was raised.

"That's what's th' matter!" shouted another blow-hard; "whar was he when th' outlaws went through here like mad? If he'd been out with his men, and on guard, he might 'a' popped some ef 'em over."

"An' then ag'in he mightn't," chimed in another. "Mebby he'd got it himself, an' there'd be a vacancy in th' office now."

"Yas, that's so. You bet Nigel is on th' shoot, some."

"Oh! you kin trust to th' sher'f ter keep out o' danger," bellowed Mr. Bull. "He ain't goin' ter git hurt if he kin help it, he ain't. But he will git hurt all th' same. I'm gittin' inter trim fer another racket w' him, an' when it comes off you kin bet that you'll see him done up. I'll make him look sick, you bet I will. His deputy will have ter fill th' office fer a considerable period o' while, *pro tem.*, or I'm no prophet."

And then he started to sing again:

"Whar, oh! whar is our dude sher-ref?"

"Whar, oh! whar kin he be?"

With his— *Uugggh!*"

He got no further.

Just at that point the "dude sher-reff" suddenly materialized, and his foot was planted under the coat-tails of the bully with a force that lifted him ten inches clear of the ground.

"I'm right here," Stillwood announced; "can I do anything for you? What seems to be your trouble this time?"

When the fellow struck the ground he wheeled around, exclaiming:

"What hit me? What was it that riz me like that? Why, hello, sher'f! how d'ye do?"

Mr. Bull's bravery had petered suddenly out, and the crowd laughed at him to see how quickly his tune had changed at the appearance of Stillwood.

"Oh! I'm pretty well, thank you," the sheriff responded; "how are you?"

"Me? Oh! I'm bloomin', I am."

"You seemed to want to see me, by the way you were bellowing for me," Stillwood further observed, "so I thought I'd let you know that I'm around."

"Yes, yes, jest so, ter be sure, of course. I wanted to inform ye th' outlaws has been in town ag'in."

"I am aware of it, sir."

"Well, then I needn't tell ye."

"Was that all you wanted?"

"Yes, that was all."

"Didn't I hear you say something about making ready to try another hack at me? Didn't I?"

"Oh! nol not a tall, sher'f!"

The crowd around laughed itself hoarse.

"Well, then I did not understand aright," Stillwood commented, "I was going to say that there is no time like the present. I'm glad you didn't say so."

Stillwood passed on, and the bully glared after him until he was out of hearing, when he remarked:

"But that don't make it so, Mister Dude Sher'f, it don't. When I am ready fer you I will let ye know, and you kin bet that you will be sick of yer—"

"Bah! Let up!"

It was Deputy Dan, who came along just then.

Bull turned upon him like a flash. If afraid of the sheriff, now, he was not afraid of his deputy.

"I wanted ter git holt o' you!" he yelled, "an' here is jest th' chance! I'll show ye that ye can't do as ye please—"

He stopped. Dan's revolver was looking at him.

"Keep your distance," the deputy warned, "or I'll spoil your beauty for you. I'm no fighter, but I kin shoot a little, and if you don't believe it, jest come on and let us try a shot at yer ears."

The bully hesitated about it, and to hesitate was lost. That revolver took the courage out of him, and he turned away muttering:

"You've got th' drop this time ag'in, but we'll see how it will be next time we come together."

"It won't be any better for you, I can tell you that now," Dan declared, and he went on, leaving the crowd making all manner of fun at the recent bold gladiator of the local arena.

In the mean time, when Stillwood reached the porch of the hotel he was just in time to meet Francis Oakbough coming from the opposite direction.

They greeted as usual, and young Oakbough's first words framed an inquiry concerning his father.

The sheriff reported that he was all right, as nearly as circumstances would allow, and other remarks followed, ending with comments on the appearance of the outlaw and his band.

"By the way," Oakbough observed, "I have come up here this early because I have got an idea into my head that I can't get out."

"And what is it?"

"I believe that detective of ours is here."

"Yes?"

"Yes, and I'll tell you who he is. You remember that man who came in the stage last night?"

"Which one do you refer to?"

"That short, thick fellow in the dark suit."

"I thought of that when I saw him, but I considered it none of my business to meddle with, so I said nothing."

"No, for if it is he, he will make himself known. Let's go in, as I see you are headed for this place."

They entered the bar-room, and there found the object of their remarks, Mr. Ward Wyman.

Others were present, and old Josh was at his post behind the bar, as usual, with a cheery good-morning for everybody.

When he had greeted the sheriff and young Oakbough, he turned to Mr. Wyman and remarked:

"This is th' gentleman you was askin' for, sir."

The stranger advanced at once.

"Mr. Francis Oakbough?" he questioned.

"Yes, sir."

Then, in a lower and confidential tone, the stranger made himself known.

"I am Ward Wyman," he said, "a detective from San Francisco. I am here to take hold

of the matter you telegraphed to the police about."

"I am glad to know you, and glad you are here," Francis greeted. "I was just telling our sheriff here that I believed you were our man, and he had the same thought. Allow me to introduce you."

An introduction followed, and the three withdrew to a corner to talk.

Their conversation need not be set forth, for it was mainly made up of questions put by the detective, the answers to which brought out only such points as are already known to the reader.

They continued in conversation till the bell rung for breakfast, when the detective and the sheriff went to the breakfast-room, and Oakbough went home.

It was arranged that the detective should call at the house later on.

At half-past nine he and Stillwood were at the Oakbough residence, and were met by Francis.

The detective wanted to see the scene of the crime, in order to have a full and accurate understanding of the case.

"I am sorry that I was not here on the morning of the crime," was his first remark, when he was shown into the room.

"It would have been a big advantage, no doubt," returned Francis, "but as you were not, it remains to make the most you can of what you can discover now."

"True enough."

He looked around the room with a practiced eye, and advanced to the windows and examined them. Both were now fastened.

"Can you tell me how these windows were found that morning?" he asked.

"I can not," answered young Oakbough.

"Did you look to see, sheriff?"

Stillwood had to own that he had not.

"Will you call that woman, Reytol?" the detective requested. "I will question her a little."

Joan Reytol was called up to the room, and she came in with a quiet air, as though only too willing to lend all the help she could.

Has she been described? A plain, yet not bad-looking face, and of an age hard to guess. Her features bespoke anything between thirty and forty, but her white hair seemed to indicate that she was older.

The detective cast one keen glance at her, and asked:

"Do you know how these windows were on the morning of the crime?"

"They were fastened, as you see them now, sir," was the quiet response.

"You are sure of that?"

"I am, for I thought possibly some one had entered that way, and looked to see if they were fastened."

"Has the family washing been done since the murder?"

This struck all three of his hearers as a peculiar question, and the woman looked at him a moment, and hesitated before replying.

"It has not, yet," she finally said.

"I want to see the towel that Mr. Oakbough used in the bath-room that morning, if you please," the detective requested.

CHAPTER XIX.

POINTS UNTHOUGHT-OF BEFORE.

"I WILL bring it, if I can find it among the others," Joan said.

"Were there no marks of blood on it, so that you can easily tell it?"

"I do not remember. I do not think I looked at the towel. Wait a moment, and I will bring it."

She went out, and while she was absent from the room the detective looked around further.

Stillwood and young Oakbough watched him with interest.

He asked numerous questions, all bearing upon the position in which the body had been found, the position of the chair on which Mr. Oakbough's coat was hanging, and similar.

He seemed to attach importance to the most trifling detail.

His companions began to look upon him as a shrewd man, and had hopes that now the truth would soon be out.

Presently Joan returned with a towel, and gave it to the detective saying:

"I think this is the one, but I cannot be quite sure. There is no mark of blood on any of them, sir."

"You think this is the one, but you are not sure," the detective repeated.

"I am not quite sure, sir."

"Well, there is no blood on this one. I must see the others. It is strange that no stain whatever is on any of them."

"Shall I bring them all up, sir?"

"Oh, no, do not put yourself to that trouble; I can go right down with you, and—"

"No, no, do not think of it, sir. It is no trouble."

The woman turned and was off quickly, and without any further notice in her direction the detective asked to see the bath-room.

He was taken there.

Here he looked around with all the care he had shown in the bed-room.

"No blood is here now," he observed.

"It has been cleaned up," explained Francis.

"We had it cleaned away as soon as we were permitted to do so."

"Where was it found?"

He was shown, carefully.

"In the basin, eh?" he commented interrogatively. "That looks bad. It seems to prove that Mr. Oakbough's bath was simply a washing of his hands. Was the blood in the basin bright?"

"Some of it seemed to be," answered the sheriff.

"Um. Seems like a clear case. We will now look at the stains on the floor, if you please, or you can show me where they were, if they are not visible now."

They went out into the hall and back to the door of the bed-room.

"I do not know whether we can detect them now or not," observed Francis, "but they were along from here to the bath-room door, and inside."

"And none anywhere else?"

"A few drops on the stairs, and by the front door."

"A plain case."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Francis.

"I mean that it looks bad for your father, sir."

"Then you, too, are against him?"

"I am neither for nor against. I am going by the proof. He did the deed, and rushed out of the room to wash off the blood, dropping it all the way, though perhaps he was not aware of it. Having washed and made sure that no stains were upon him, he returned to the room, took the knife and started for the street, thus dropping the few drops that you say were found on the stairs and near the door. Oh! it looks like a clear case when that quarrel and threat are taken in connection."

Francis groaned and Stillwood looked rather blue. He was about to say something, but just then Joan Reytol returned with an armful of towels.

"Here they are," she said, "all of them."

The detective took them up one by one, looking at them with care. Not one of them showed a sign of blood, and it was plain that none of them had been washed out since use.

"You are right," he agreed, "not a particle of blood is to be found here. It shows that Mr. Oakbough made a thorough job of his washing."

"You think he is guilty, then?" the woman quickly asked.

"I must think so."

"Oh! poor man, poor man."

The words were uttered in a tone that seemed to show that a last hope of his possible innocence had been taken away.

"That is all, with you," the detective told her. "Take the towels back again; they have told nothing new."

Joan gathered them up and went away.

The detective shut the door.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is a painful matter to you, I know. It is painful to me, a stranger to the accused man. I hoped to find direct proof that would show him innocent, and—"

He paused.

"And what?" demanded Francis, eagerly, but with a tone of bitterness.

"And everything points the other way. Shall I stop my search or go on and make the most I can of it, even though it looms up darker than ever?"

He was looking now straight at Francis.

"Go on, sir," the young man ordered, "until you are convinced that you can learn nothing more."

"Very well. Now, I will ask a question that must not be made known that I have asked."

"What is it? It shall not be mentioned."

"Do you know when your father changes his underwear?"

"When he takes his weekly bath," Francis answered promptly.

"Good. Were his underclothes here in the bath-room on the morning of the crime?"

"I do not know, but Joan can tell—"

"No, let no one know that I have asked this. You know where the clothes are kept. Go down and send that woman up here, and while I detain her a moment you see if his underclothes are in the basket, or wherever they may be kept."

Francis brightened up with a new hope, and hurried out.

"As soon as he was out of the room the detective turned to the sheriff and, in a low tone, declared:

"Oakbough is innocent."

"What!" exclaimed Stillwood, "you think so?"

"I do. I do not want it to appear that I do, however; at any rate not yet. I can almost swear to his innocence."

"But how, and in so short a time?"

"Listen: Would a man who washed his hands so carefully that no stain can be found on the towel, be likely to leave a stain in the basin?"

Would a man so careful as that be likely to leave a trail of blood from one room to the other, and then own that he had been in the bath-room? If he took a bath, in the tub, that morning, he is innocent beyond doubt, though I have no doubt about it anyhow. And— But, hist! here is the woman."

There was a knock at the door, and the detective opened it.

"Sorry to trouble you again," he said to Joan, who it was, "but I would like to ask one or two other questions."

"Very well, sir."

"Of course you are anxious to prove Mr. Oakbough innocent if you can?"

"Why, certainly, sir."

"Can't there be some other way to account for this blood here?"

"None that I can see, sir."

"Is it not just possible that Miss Oakbough is guilty, after all?"

"I would not believe her guilty unless I had actually seen her do the deed, sir. It seems to me impossible."

"That may be, and yet she may be guilty. Why should she declare that she is, if she is not?"

"Why, can't you see? It is to shield her father. I believe she would lay down her life to save his."

"She must think that he is guilty, then."

"Yes, I believe she does. She heard that awful threat, the same one I heard, and that must influence her."

"That is all; I guess I shall not have to trouble you again."

Francis was returning, and as Joan went away he entered the bath-room.

"Well?" the detective inquired.

"His underclothes are there. He did change them that morning."

"He was careful, then, to an extreme. He has left no stone unturned, and no doubt felt secure that no proof could be laid to him. But, he was careless about the blood."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Francis. "The fact that father took a bath that morning, in just his usual way, proves his innocence."

"He ought to have mentioned the point at the inquest, then."

"The fact that he did not do so, sir, adds more proof to his innocence. If guilty, he would have laid stress on the point."

The detective had cautioned, and all words were spoken in low tones.

"I see you grasp it," the detective commented. "Your father is innocent, Mr. Oakbough, and it only remains to find out who is guilty."

"And you must do that."

"On the contrary, sir, I am going away from here this afternoon."

"Going away?"

"Yes. I shall give it out as my opinion that your father is guilty, and shall throw up the case."

"But, your object in this? I cannot see how anything is to be gained by such a line of action as that. Perhaps you are coming back in disguise."

The detective smiled.

"If I do, sir, you will not know it. What I have explained to you is to give you a cue to what you must do. You must act naturally, and appear disgusted at my work. Still maintain your declaration that your father is innocent, but advance no proof—not a particle of proof, understand."

An earnest talk followed, and after that the detective had a brief interview with Rhoda, and went away, after looking through the house.

At the hotel he expressed his opinion freely that Mr. Oakbough was guilty, and when the stage set out for Rixford, shortly after dinner, he was a passenger in it.

It now looked dark indeed for Mr. Oakbough in the eyes of the public.

CHAPTER XX.

A STRANGER'S TEN-STRIKE.

DURING the forenoon a notice had been posted. It was displayed in the various public places of the town.

The notice was neatly printed, with here and there a place left to be filled in with pen or pencil.

It was as follows:

"YSEULT,

QUEEN OF SHEBA,

[Licensed Gambler];

"Will open her game to-night in the Palace Saloon, where all who have a fondness for the 'tiger' may attack him. A fair and honest game is guaranteed, and the 'bank' is practically unlimited."

"Game closes promptly at midnight."

It is needless to say that such a notice drew attention.

At that time and place, gambling was a business, as much as any other, and men, and women, too, frequently put their luck to the test, with varying results.

The Palace Saloon was on the other side of the street from the Seven Stars, and was the favorite gaming-place of the town. It was

orderly, well conducted, and had the reputation of being "square."

During the day but little was seen of the "Queen."

She kept pretty close to her room, and had no callers except the proprietor of the "Palace," whom she sent for to arrange for the privilege of playing in his saloon.

Sheriff Stillwood met her at dinner, and had to acknowledge to himself that she was superbly handsome.

She was richly dressed, and the few diamonds she displayed almost rivaled the sun for splendor.

She spoke to him during the meal, and they fell into an easy conversation.

"Your town of Raspberry seems to be having a good deal of excitement of late," she observed, after they had exchanged some remarks.

"Yes, so it has," the sheriff agreed.

"And not a little of it has been caused by the outlaws we encountered last night, I believe."

"All of it, except the murder of Mrs. Oakbough; of course you have heard of that."

"Yes, I have heard of it. A strange case, but a plain one, it seems."

"Then you judge Mr. Oakbough guilty?"

"I can hardly do otherwise, framing my opinion by what I have heard of the matter."

"Perhaps not, but there is a strong public sentiment in his favor."

"Well, if you think him innocent, may it not be that these outlaws know something about the matter?"

"I do not think it is they. In fact, I feel sure that Nigel had nothing to do with it."

"Well, of course I can form no sound opinion. The thought came into my head that perhaps he might be guilty, that is all."

They did not discuss the matter much further, and the woman's interest in it being of only a passing nature, seemingly, it apparently dropped from her mind immediately.

"I hope the stage will not be late to-night," she remarked, as she was about leaving the table.

"Do you think it will, sir?"

"It probably will not," Stillwood answered.

"Nigel will no doubt leave it alone for a few days again."

"My servant is coming by it," the woman explained, "with my outfit."

She went from the room, and Stillwood fell to thinking about her.

Not over thirty years of age at most, seemingly, she looked even younger than that. Her manner was ladylike, and there did not seem to be anything of the wild and reckless spirit that might have been looked for, considering her calling.

The day passed without event worthy of record.

About six o'clock the stage came rolling into the town, and drew up in front of the Seven Stars with a loud "Whoa!" from the driver.

"Wal, we got through all safe and sound this time, citizens," he greeted. "I sort er looked fer th' outlaw ag'in, but he didn't appear."

There were several passengers, and among them a darky. He was a short, thick-set fellow, as black as the ace of spades is usually found, and his whole interest was centered upon a big trunk and a long box that were strapped on behind the stage.

The gambler queen came out upon the porch, and called out to him.

"Sam," she called.

"Yes 'm," he responded.

"The trunk belongs here, and the box in that saloon over the way there."

"Yes 'm."

"You can pay some of these men to help you with them."

"Yes 'm."

Help was soon had, and the trunk and box were soon taken off.

"An' I'm glad ter git rid of 'em," declared the driver. "That nig has had me almost crazy all th' way over, with his worryin' about 'em. I won't jest say it's so, but hang me if I b'lieve he allowed a fly ter light on 'em all th' way."

The gambler queen smiled.

"Sam is very careful of my property," she observed, and with that she returned into the house.

That evening the Palace was the place of general attraction, and by eight o'clock it was crowded.

The saloon had two rooms, the first being the saloon proper, in the American sense, and the other the gambling-hall.

The second room was large and brilliantly lighted, with carpet on the floor and wine-colored cloth hangings on walls and ceilings.

It was well furnished, with the articles usually found in such places, and was intended to be attractive, and to provide for all tastes. There were card-tables, faro lay-outs, and two billiard tables.

This room was well filled, and the largest proportion of the crowd were seemingly men of means, for they were, as a rule, well-dressed. The various games were in progress, and the place was full of the bustle of business, as such places are when in active operation.

The regular devotees or patrons of the place saw at a glance, on entering, that a new attraction had been added. In the rear of the room, between the two large windows at the end, was a new faro lay-out, and behind the board sat a darky, as black and shining as a knot of polished ebony. The table was in readiness for play, but it was idle, and evidently waiting for somebody.

The person for whom it waited was the gambler queen, as everybody knew, or soon learned after entering.

A crowd of the best-dressed men in the saloon stood around it, evidently eager to see the "Queen of Sheba" when she put in her appearance.

"At what time will the Queen appear?" one man finally asked.

"Promp' at nine, sah," the darky informed.

"And you don't open the game before she comes, eh?"

"No, sah."

The man who asked these questions was a stranger in the place.

No one present seemed to know him, though a good many took a second look at him, as though thinking, perhaps, they had seen him before.

Nine o'clock came, finally, though it seemed to delay longer than usual on this occasion, and promptly on time the gambler queen entered the room.

She was superbly attired in a suit of royal-purple velvet, and her array of diamonds sparkled and scintillated almost blindingly. She advanced to her table with an easy, graceful step, and at her approach the darky rose and made way for her to sit down in her place.

This she did, and prepared immediately for business.

"Notice, gentlemen," she said, "the cards and box I use. Take them in your hands and examine them, please. I want it seen from the start that my game is honest."

The box was examined by several of those around the table, and then returned to its owner.

The woman put the cards in it, and announced:

"I am ready, gentlemen; make your play."

The darky had taken a position at the side of the queen, and was ready to keep the tally in the usual way.

Among those who were looking on, or waiting to play, were Sheriff Stillwood, Lance Guydon, Ulysses Burbank, and others known to the reader.

The first man to play was Burbank.

He dropped a hundred-dollar bill on the ace, with the remark:

"I will try that for a starter."

Others placed smaller sums in various ways, and when they had done, the cards were drawn.

Burbank's hundred went to the bank, and only some small sums were won.

For half an hour there was no excitement about the play, and no large sums of money were risked.

"Finally, though, Burbank, who had dropped five hundred, exclaimed:

"Luck is against me this time, sure! I am usually pretty sure to win at this game, but I guess this is my night off. Here, I'll risk in a jump all I've got, and make room for some one else."

As he said this he dropped four hundred dollars on the tray, and waited the result.

Only one tray remained in the box, and Burbank was willing to take the even risk.

Finally it appeared—for the bank.

"The worst luck I ever had!" Burbank cried, as he moved away.

"Make your play, gentlemen," the Queen invited, in her even, melodious tone.

"I understand this game is unlimited," observed a man, who stepped into the place Burbank had just vacated.

"It is, sir, practically," was the response.

"Notice will be given when there is danger of its limit being reached."

"Very well, madam. I will put a thousand dollars on the queen."

The man was the stranger who had spoken to the darky before the Queen of the game had come, asking what time she would be on hand.

His play was bold and his manner confident, and some of the smaller players followed his lead.

The cards were drawn, and one queen came out for the player. He put the money on the same card. Another queen came out for him. Again he put the money on the same card. Another queen fell to him, presently; his money remained on that card; and finally the last queen was drawn, and for him. He had won fifteen thousand dollars, and all within ten minutes.

The money had been paid, promptly, and now the voice of the gambler queen was heard as firm and calm as ever:

"Make your play, gentlemen."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE OUTLAW ARRESTED.

It was an exciting moment.

But neither the stranger nor the woman shared it.

The former still allowed the money to remain on the queen, and another deal was started.

Several cards were drawn, and then, finally, came a queen.

This time it was for the bank.

"Ha! I thought you would keep on till you got your fingers burned!" exclaimed Lance Guydon.

"Just what I was looking for," echoed Burbank.

"Make your play, gentlemen," said the fair dealer.

"It is only a slight burn, however," remarked the stranger, as he produced more money. "I will try it again. Here, madam, is thirty thousand dollars."

"Just as you please, sir."

The money was again placed on the queen.

One by one, one by one, the cards were drawn from the box, until presently another queen appeared.

Again it was for the bank.

And still neither winner nor loser showed any outward signs of excitement.

"Burned again, am I?" smiled the player.

"And I reckon that will satisfy you, too!" exclaimed one of the watchers.

"You are mistaken, sir."

The stranger drew a package from an inner pocket, and proceeded to count out another pile of bills of big denomination.

"There!" he cried, flinging it down on the queen as before, "I will see what that will bring me."

Slowly and steadily the cards were drawn, and ere long another queen clicked from the box.

The stranger had won!

"Ha! that is better!" he cried.

His money was left on the same card.

All other play in the room had now ceased, and the crowd was around the table of the "Queen of Sheba."

She drew out the cards with all the calmness that she had at first displayed, and the audience almost held its breath in suspense. Which way would that cool hundred thousand go?

It was soon shown. Another queen appeared, and—the bank took the money.

The fair hands of the dealer gathered it up, and it was handed to the keeping of the darky, who thrust it into a strong hand-bag that was bound to his waist by a bright steel chain.

At this point Lancelot Guydon sprang up with a muttered curse.

He had come into the room with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket, with the intention of breaking the bank. He rose without a dollar.

"Make your play, gentlemen."

That voice, as calm, clear, musical as ever.

"I will make one more effort," observed the stranger who had lost so heavily. "If I lose, I am broke."

Taking all the money he had left, he flung it down upon the queen, still holding to that choice, and exclaiming:

"There it is, another fifty thousand! You must break me or I will break the bank."

Sheriff Stillwood was standing near to the stranger, and no one noticed that his hand was upon his revolver.

What was coming?

"You know de queens am out, sah," the teller at that moment announced.

"Ha! the deuce! so they are," the player exclaimed. "Well, no matter; there is one ace left, and I'll change to that."

He did so, and the game went on.

That ace seemed determined not to appear, nor did it until the stock was nearly exhausted. When it did come to light it was for—the bank.

"Broke!" the man cried, for the first time showing a degree of anger.

"Make your play, gentlemen."

"Will you be here to-morrow night?" the stranger demanded.

"I shall, sir," was the quiet response.

"Good enough. I will be on hand again, with a little more lining in my pockets."

He was about to turn away, then, when the hand of Sheriff Stillwood fell upon his shoulder, and a revolver was thrust into his face.

And then rung out the startling words:

"Night-time Nigel, you are my prisoner!"

Nothing could have occasioned greater surprise. Every person in the room appeared as though suddenly paralyzed.

But there was little time given them in which to recover, for barely had the sheriff spoken when the room was plunged in darkness, and in the same instant, or even sooner, hands seized Stillwood from behind and flung him across the room.

A crash of glass followed immediately, loud curses and blows were heard, and a moment more a wild yell was heard without, and horses dashed out of the valley at breakneck speed.

Before the surprise was anything like over, the outlaw and his band were out of the town and out of reach.

Only a few seconds had elapsed, and light was again upon the scene by the sudden opening of the door that led into the other room.

And such a scene as then followed baffles description.

The card queen and her servant were upon

their feet, weapons in hand, and many others in the room were similarly "fixed."

The sudden darkness had been caused by men, stationed in different parts of the room, blowing all the lights out simultaneously.

As soon as order was anything like restored, these lamps were relighted.

In the mean time the sheriff had gathered himself up and sprung through the window, and had sent some shots after the retreating horse-men, but without effect.

He was joined by his deputy the next moment.

"How did you recognize him?" Dan asked.

"By his voice," was the reply. "I thought I had him, but it seems he was too well backed."

"Yes, and he wouldn't come here any other way. It is too bad you didn't give him cold lead."

"I couldn't do that. There was just a doubt about his identity, and, too, I wanted him alive."

"Do you know who flung you to the floor?"

"No; do you?"

"One was Ulysses Burbank."

"You don't mean it!"

"Fact."

"Well, say nothing. Don't let on."

"I won't. Are you going to give chase?"

"No, it's no use. By the time we got started they would have too much of a lead. We'll take it easy, and our time will come."

These words had been spoken in low tones, and the two men now went around and re-entered the gaming-hall.

Order was in a measure restored.

"Are you sure that was the outlaw, sir?" the gambler queen asked, when she saw Stillwood come in.

"Yes, I am sure of it," was the answer.

"Can you ask further proof? He was not long in getting out."

"No, the proof is sufficient. I meant to ask how you know him."

"I recognized his voice."

"Ha! then you have encountered him before."

"Yes, I have heard him talk."

"It is too bad you did not capture the rascal. Better luck next time, perhaps."

"Yes, I hope so."

"Why didn't you shoot him on sight?" asked young Guydon.

"That would be too much like murder, sir. Besides, I want him alive, and alive I am going to have him, too."

The card queen resumed her place, and invited the players to make their game, but it was some time before the room became sufficiently settled for the game to go on as it had been going before.

And then the interest in it was lost, and at eleven o'clock the bank closed.

In the mean time the sheriff and his deputy had gone away to the office at the jail, where they entered to talk over the recent events in quiet.

"You remember what we thought when the outlaw stopped young Oakbough's messenger and read the telegram he had," Stillwood recalled.

"Yes, I remember."

"We agreed that he must have a spy here in town."

"Exactly. And now we have an idea who that spy is."

"Ulysses Burbank."

"Yes, if it is not Lance Guydon, and I am inclined to think both of them stand in with the robber."

"I would not wonder a bit. It looks bad for them."

"But, mind you, this must not leak out. You know the old man Guydon is to let me know the next time he ships bullion, and I am going to try another hack at Mr. Nigel. The outlaw will be duly posted when it is to be sent."

"And in the mean while it won't be a bad idea to watch these two fellows a little to see what goes on."

"That is what I was going to say. I will put Russel and Bradley to play spy on them a little, on the quiet."

They talked on, and while they were still engaged in conversation there came a rap at the door.

"Who is there?" Stillwood demanded.

"Francis Oakbough," was the response.

The door was opened immediately, and the young man entered.

"Is this true what I have just heard about Night-time Nigel?" he asked.

"That he has been in town?—yes, it is a fact."

"And that he lost a fortune at the hands of the gambler queen?"

"Yes."

"Then I must see her to-morrow. Some of the money stolen from the bank was marked, and this may prove a chance to get some of it back again."

The three talked together till a late hour.

CHAPTER XXII.

RESTORING STOLEN MONEY.

It was a much later hour when two persons

stole silently to the rear of the Oakbough residence.

One of these persons was a man, the other a woman. At a certain point the woman stopped, and the man advanced to a rear door.

He was busy there for a moment, and when he returned the woman went forward and entered the house, the man following on and stopping at the door. There he waited, as though on guard.

Let us follow the woman.

If a stranger there, she must have been well directed.

Without hesitation she advanced along the hall, opened silently a door, and passed into a room.

There she stopped and flashed the light of a bull's-eye around, and seeing a door on the other side of the room, advanced to that and passed through.

That door opened into a room that was evidently used for washing, and similar rough household work.

The woman closed the door, slipped a bolt into place, and then began immediately to overhaul a basket of clothes that stood on the floor.

Piece by piece she took the articles out, looking at each one carefully, and missing none.

To the towels she paid particular attention.

Then followed some gentlemen's shirts and underwear, which met with the same careful scrutiny.

"Not a drop of blood anywhere," she mused.

"He is an innocent man. All that blood could not have come on his coat, and none on his shirt, in the act of doing the awful deed."

She searched on, missing nothing, but her search was not rewarded, if she desired to find blood-stains.

Putting the clothes back into the basket, she began a thorough search of the room.

Into the wash-tubs, into the stove, into the closet, under the tubs—into every place did she pry.

Finally she uttered a low exclamation.

She had been looking in the wood-box, under the wood that was in it, and she drew out a rolled garment.

Unfolding it, it proved to be an apron, and on it were stains that looked suspiciously like blood. A close examination proved that it was blood.

"Ha! a discovery!" she exclaimed. "Now we know that Rhoda Oakbough is innocent. Were she guilty, how soon she would bring this to light!"

She continued her search, but found nothing more of interest, and making sure that she was leaving everything about as found, she took her leave of that room, carrying the apron with her.

Recrossing the kitchen, she went out into the hall once more, and having closed the door, passed up-stairs.

Now she became more cautious than ever, if possible.

Without any hesitation she went to the room where the murder had been done, and closing the door, looked around as she had done below.

Satisfied, evidently, that all was right, she approached a wardrobe and opened it.

The bull's-eye lantern she carried served her well here, and by its light she was able to look well at the clothing the wardrobe contained.

She examined the various articles with care, and presently selected a dress from among those that hung there on the hooks, taking one that showed signs of having been worn more than most of the others.

While she was thus engaged she fancied she heard a step, and her light was turned off immediately and a revolver was in her grasp.

She listened attentively, but not hearing the sound repeated, went on with her work.

Besides the dress she selected a wrap, a hat, veil and gloves.

These articles were made into as small a compass as possible, and then the wardrobe was closed and everything put in about the same order as it had been before.

Stepping to the door, now in the dark, the woman listened, and hearing nothing passed out and down the stairs.

No person appeared to bar her progress, and in a little time she stepped out into the rear yard where the man was still waiting for her.

"Well?" he interrogated.

"It is all right," was the response.

"And the proof?"

"Mr. O. is innocent."

"Good enough; let's get away soon as we can."

Silently they went away, as silently as they had come, and were lost to sight in the darkness.

No one had seen them, and there was none to say whence they had come or whither they went. Their work had been done carefully and well. Who and what were they, and what their object?

At an early hour on the following morning Francis Oakbough received a note, addressed in a woman's hand.

Opening it and glancing at the signature, he

found that it was from Yseult, the "Queen of Sheba."

Wondering what could have led her to write to him, he read the missive.

It was soon plain. She wanted him to call on her, to examine the money she had won on the previous night, to see if he could identify any of it as the money that had been stolen from the bank.

At ten o'clock he called, and was shown up to her sitting-room, where her black servant opened the door.

The two had previously been introduced.

"Good-morning, Mr. Oakbough," the gambler queen greeted.

Francis responded politely, and being invited to sit down, took a chair that the darky placed for him.

"It is needless for me to ask if you received my note," the woman observed, "your presence here shows that you did."

"Yes, madam, and I would like to examine the money as you mentioned."

"You shall do so, but first please tell me what kind of money was stolen, and what private mark was upon it, if any."

"I am willing to do that. There was fifty thousand dollars in five-hundred-dollar bills. These bills had the letter C in red ink in the upper right-hand corner on the back."

"Very good; and what else?"

"There was a sum in hundred-dollar bills, but I do not know the exact amount. These were similarly marked."

"Can you describe any further?"

"No, I cannot. There was a big amount in gold and small bills. All told, it amounted to close upon two hundred thousand dollars."

"Quite a snug fortune."

"Yes, and a big loss."

"Sam," turning to her servant, "bring here the money that was won last night. Bring all of it."

"Yes'm."

The darky opened the trunk and took out the hand-bag he had had with him on the previous night, and carried it to the woman.

Opening it, she took out the money she had won.

"My winnings last night," she said, "amount to about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. One hundred thousand of that was from the outlaw, and twenty from young Mr. Guydon."

"And there are the lost five-hundred-dollar bills!" Francis exclaimed.

"Yes, I believe you are right."

She passed them over to him.

Young Oakbough took the money and examined several of the bills.

"Yes, these are they," he affirmed. "Shall I count the amount?"

"Yes, please."

His experienced fingers flew rapidly over the pile of bills, and in a minute or so he announced:

"Just the fifty thousand."

"Good! Take it, and now I will see what further I can do for you."

She took more money from the hand-bag and laid it on the table, requesting the young man to examine that.

"Here are the hundreds," he declared immediately. "See, the mark I told you about."

"Very well," calmly, "see how much there is of it."

This time Francis was a little longer at work, but presently he had made the count.

"Forty thousand dollars more," he said.

"Very well," with a motion of the hand, "take that, too."

Of course the cashier was only too glad to do so. The gambler queen had no right to the money, while he had every right to it.

He had, through her, recovered ninety thousand dollars of the bank's funds.

"I cannot begin to thank you for this great service," he remarked.

"You owe me no thanks. You could have obliged me to deliver the money to you. Now, can you identify any more?"

"No, that is all."

"Very well."

The woman began to count out more of the money, and the cashier watching her, saw that the amount she stopped at was ten thousand.

She handed it over to him, saying:

"There, that makes an even hundred thousand. Take it, for undoubtedly it is yours, as perhaps more of it is, too."

"I have no proof that it is the bank's funds, though."

"No matter, take it. It cost me nothing."

"Well, I am thankful to you, madam, and if I can do any favor in return, you have only to command me."

"I will remember your offer, sir."

The darky provided a newspaper, and the money was made into a neat package that was not likely to draw attention.

"Have you seen Mr. Stillwood this morning?" the Queen asked.

"No, I have not, madam."

"If you do, please ask him to call on me at his convenience."

"I will do so, with pleasure."

After some further conversation Francis Oakbough took his leave, going immediately to the jail to tell his father the good news. Now the bank could resume business.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MYSTERY UPON MYSTERY.

WHEN he reached the jail Oakbough entered the office.

Sheriff Stillwood was there, and was in conversation with the elder Guydon.

When greetings had been exchanged, and the usual commonplaces uttered, young Oakbough requested:

"May I have just a word with you in private, Mr. Stillwood?"

"Certainly; excuse me for a moment, Mr. Guydon," and the sheriff stepped to the door.

"What is it?" he asked.

"That woman at the hotel—the gambler queen—wants to see you when you can find it convenient to call."

"All right. She wasn't around when I was at breakfast. Have you been to see about your money?"

"She sent for me, and has restored a clean hundred thousand."

"Whew! that's good."

Francis asked permission to go in and see his father, and it being given, he went in that direction and the sheriff turned back into the office.

"Then you have arranged to ship to-morrow afternoon, have you, Mr. Guydon?" he observed, carrying on the conversation which had been interrupted.

"Yes, to-morrow afternoon, and by the stage, as usual."

"And what is the amount to be?"

"About fifty thousand dollars' worth."

"Of course you have kept this very quiet."

"Very quiet indeed. No one is to know anything about it."

"But how will it be put on the stage without the public knowing it? You see I don't want any one to know it is there, except the driver."

"It can be put in the stage while it is in the stable yard at the rear of the hotel. It can be put in before daylight, and no one will know it is there but myself and son and you and the driver."

"Good enough. That ought to work. I will govern myself accordingly. It is not to be given to the Express Company until it reaches Rixford, then."

"They will not accept it sooner. Their office here has orders not to take any cash or bullion for transportation at present."

"I had not heard of that. Seems to me here is a chance to get your bullion through in safety."

"How?"

"Pack it in some rough manner, unlike the usual way, and send it by Express as some ordinary article."

"But its weight would tell against it."

"Pack it as a part of machinery. No one would know the difference."

"But the address to which sent would tell the story."

"Write to the machine company and the mint about it, and that difficulty could easily be overcome at the other end."

"Well, there may be something in that, but for the present instance I will stick to my own plan."

"Very well, it was only a suggestion."

"Now, what plans do you propose to adopt to see that my shipment gets through in safety?"

"None whatever, sir."

"What?"

"I say, none whatever. My efforts are all going to be directed toward the capture of the outlaw."

"Oh! yes, I see. That is so, of course. If you can get him, of course my bullion will be safe. Well, what plan are you going to work on to get him?"

"I prefer not to disclose that, sir."

"Oh! well, just as you please. Well, I have posted you, as you asked me to do, and to-morrow afternoon the stage will carry away the treasure, in a common box under the seats inside."

"Very good. Perhaps it will get through safely this time."

Guydon took his leave, and Stillwood set out for the hotel.

He sent up his name to the gambler queen, and he was invited to her rooms.

The darky was on hand to open the door to him, as he had to Oakbough, and the sheriff met with about the same reception that the other man had met.

When Stillwood was seated, the woman observed:

"I have a little disclosure to make that may be of interest to you. Naturally, you are interested in the matter of the bank robbery that was done here some days ago."

"Yes, most certainly, madam. It is my desire to capture the outlaw and his band at an early day."

"The disclosure concerns them. Has Mr. Oakbough told you anything?"

"He told me about the money you restored."

"Well, sir, eighty thousand of the money he identified was lost at my game by the outlaw, but the other twenty thousand by a seemingly respectable young man of this town."

"I am not surprised."

"Then I need not mention his name?"

"You need not. I was watching the game. Lancelot Guydon was the person who lost the twenty thousand."

"You are right; he it was."

"Well, I am thankful for the point of information. That is one point against him, and it proves his connection with the outlaw in some way or other."

"Rest assured that he is interested in Night-time Nigel."

"How about the money that his companion, Burbank, lost? Was any of that marked?"

"No, I believe not, but he is another one for you to have an eye upon. You will think, perhaps, that I am interested in this matter, and so I am; I am interested in every case where I can work ill to rascals of that stamp."

"It is a pity, and a wonder, too, that you did not kill the outlaw chief the other night."

"My will was good enough to do it, but luck favored him."

"There will be a turn in the lane sooner or later, though."

"There is a turn in every lane, sir. You have scored one big point now; you have seen his face, with plenty of time to study it, and you will know him again at sight."

"That is true. When we come together again he shall have a chance to defend himself, for I think it will be his life or mine."

"That sounds like business. If I can be of any help to you, in any way, sir, let me know."

"Just now I do not see that you can. By the way, he asked if you would be on hand again to-night. Do you think he will be bold enough to come again soon?"

"You know more about the fellow than I do, sir. If he is a daring character he may be bold enough to come again, in disguise."

"He is bold enough to do anything."

"Then it will be well to look out for him. No doubt he will play high, if he does appear, so any one that has a large amount of money will bear watching."

"I think so, too. Well, probably I will be on hand again when you open your game."

"I notice that you do not play, sir."

"I am a poor man, with no money to lose."

"And a faro-table is the last place in the world for you to expect to make money. I, a professional, tell you this for your own good. Proof—if the game were a losing one for the banker, would any one be foolish enough to make it a business? I think not. The profits are all on the dealer's side of the table, in the end. Beware of the tiger, Mr. Stillwood."

As she uttered this little piece of advice, the Queen laughed merrily.

"I know that what you say is true," Stillwood returned. "For every dollar you lost last night you gained twenty, or more. And I am not counting the outlaw's big playing, either. But it is no business of mine. If men will play, let the tiger do its work."

After a little further conversation Stillwood went away, returning to his office at the jail.

Young Oakbough was waiting for him there.

As soon as the sheriff entered he saw that something was wrong, for the young man's face showed it.

"What is it?" Stillwood demanded.

"More mystery," was the rather doleful answer.

"And what is it this time?"

"Rhoda has disappeared, and no one knows where she is."

"Rhoda Oakbough missing?"

"Yes, missing. Joan went up to call her, after she had slept long over her usual time, as she supposed, and she discovered that Rhoda was not in her room at all. Nor was she in the house."

"Well, that is more than strange. Where can she be?"

"I do not know. And that is not all of it. It seems that Rhoda went off in her usual everyday attire, but some of her murdered step-mother's clothes are missing with her."

"Worse, and more of it. Where and when will this matter end? What is going to be done about it all?"

"That is what I want to ask of you. What is going to be done?"

"I don't know. You have no clew?"

"None at all."

"And not even a faint idea as to her reason for going?"

"Not the slightest. She is gone, and that is all there is about it."

Just then there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," the sheriff sung out.

The door swung open, and Mrs. Clayport, the postmistress, hurried in, her face pale and her manner frightened.

"Where is my daughter?" she demanded, sharply, placing herself before the astonished sheriff and looking at him with snapping eyes.

"Your daughter?" Stillwood repeated in exclamation; "I know nothing about her, Mrs."

Clayport. What is wrong? Why do you come to me thus? Is she—"

"Oh! you needn't appear so innocent!" the woman snapped. "You know well enough where she is, and I demand her of you!"

"I assure you, Mrs. Clayport, that I know nothing whatever about her. If she is missing it is news to me. Pray explain yourself calmly, and let us get at an understanding of the matter. Why do you come to me in this manner? One would think that you imagine I have stolen her, or—"

"Don't pretend, John Stillwood, that you don't know anything about her," the now angry woman cried, "for I know that you do. Just read that!"

She flourished a note in his face.

CHAPTER XXIV.

STILLWOOD'S SUSPICION.

SHERIFF STILLWOOD was a much surprised man.

Francis Oakbough was scarcely less surprised, as he listened.

The sheriff took the note from the woman's hand, and read its contents.

As he read, his face assumed its thunder-cloud expression that boded ill to somebody, and he soon demanded:

"Where did you get this, Mrs. Clayport?"

"I found it on the floor in my daughter's room."

"Well, I did not write it, that I tell you candidly."

"Then tell me who did."

"I do not know."

The note was as follows:

"Meet me at nine on Mine Street, and accompany me to make a call on R. O. Please do not fail me, as it is important."

"Ever sincerely,"

"JOHN STILLWOOD."

Mrs. Clayport's face was now decidedly pale, and she sunk into a chair.

"What can it mean, then?" she gasped.

"Are you sure it is not your work, John Stillwood?"

"I believe I have answered that question already," the sheriff answered in a tone of displeasure. "I tell you again I know nothing about it. Now allow me to ask some questions."

"Forgive me, Mr. Stillwood, then, but I thought it must be you. I will answer anything that I can."

"Did Imogene go out at nine last night?"

"Yes, she did, and has not returned yet. I thought she must have remained all night with Rhoda Oakbough, but when it began to get so late this morning I ran over to see, and found that she had not been there at all. More than that, I found that Miss Oakbough is missing, too. Do you know where she is?" turning to Francis.

"No, I do not," was the response. "I just came here to consult with Stillwood about the matter."

"Heavens! where can they be?"

Stillwood was upon his feet, and he was pacing the floor.

This was a shock to him, and he was trying to think it out.

Where had the two girls gone, if they had gone of their own will? Where had they been taken, if they had met with foul play?

The note found by Mrs. Clayport seemed to indicate that the latter was the true explanation of the matter, so far as Imogene was concerned at any rate. Whether the girls were together or not, could not be guessed.

"What is to be done, Mr. Stillwood?" the anxious mother inquired.

"I am trying to think," was the response. "I do not know what to do in the matter. The girls must be found, but how are we to find them? That is the point that will puzzle us."

"Do you think harm has come to them, sir?"

"God grant that it has not," was the fervent response. "Do you know of any person who would be likely to work ill to your daughter?"

"No, sir, not a single person that I know of. She was liked by everybody, as you are aware."

"Yes, yes, I know she was."

"Do you think they are together?" asked Francis.

"It is impossible to tell. We must start inquiry immediately. Perhaps some one saw one or the other of them last night, and can give us some clew."

The sheriff rung a bell, and it was immediately responded to by one of the employees at the jail.

"Go and find Dan Horton and tell him to come right here," was the order.

The man went, and during the time he was gone the three talked further about the strange disappearances. But they could not hit upon an explanation of the mystery.

In a little time the man came back, bringing Dan with him.

"What's up?" was the deputy's immediate inquiry.

"Have you seen or heard anything about

Rhoda Oakbough or Imogene Clayport?" the sheriff asked.

"Not a thing," was the astonished reply.

"Then go and make all the inquiries you can for them. They are both missing. Ask everybody you meet, and tell the rest of the men to do the same."

"All right, I'll do all I can."

"That is all we can do for the present," Stillwood observed, then. "We can take no other action till we get some clew to work on."

"I'll run over and see if Rhoda's horse is gone," Oakbough suddenly suggested, and he started.

"Yes, that may tell us something," agreed the sheriff.

When Francis was gone Stillwood turned to Mrs. Clayport and asked:

"Do you think Lance Guydon can have any hand in this?"

"Why! how dare you!" the woman exclaimed, in surprise.

"Oh! I dare, and I mean it," was the response.

"Why, no, of course not. Why do you ask that?"

"Well, I happen to know that he loves the young lady, or says he does at any rate, and wants her to marry him. I presume this is no news to you."

"Oh, it is no news to me, of course; but Mr. Guydon is a gentleman and a man of wealth, and to think that he would stoop to anything dishonorable— Why, it is out of the question!"

"I see by your expression that I have set you to thinking, however, Mrs. Clayport. Come, this is no time to smooth the thing over. If your daughter has rejected Guydon's suit, is it not just possible that he has had something to do with her disappearance?"

"No, no! It is impossible! I would not believe it of him. It is true that she has rejected him, finally, as she declared, but he is too much of a man to do anything dishonorable, of that I am sure. He has had my approval all along, and he knew that he has it still. He would not risk losing my good will by anything rash."

Sheriff Stillwood believed that he had hit upon the right track.

He knew something about the honor of Lancelot Guydon, and knew that he would stop at nothing to gain his object.

Perhaps he had learned that he, Stillwood, was his accepted rival for the hand of the pretty girl, and had lured her into his power by sending her the note that Mrs. Clayport had found.

"Of course you may be right," he spoke, after a pause. "It was only a thought that came to me. It would not be well to let the gentleman know of the suspicion, for he may be as innocent as myself. Of course you will let it go no further."

"Oh! I will not speak of it, if you wish, but it was rather a mean suspicion to place upon a gentleman like Mr. Guydon."

"Well, perhaps it was. We often say things in a hasty moment that were better unsaid."

"So we do. It need go no further. Of course you will do all you can to help find my poor child, Mr. Stillwood."

"Most assuredly, madam. If we can only get a clew to start on, I will lose no time."

Mr. Clayport was about to go, but just then the door opened and Lancelot Guydon stepped in, followed by Francis Oakbough, returning.

"The horse is in the stable," the latter informed.

"That only adds to the mystery, then," the sheriff observed.

Lance Guydon had addressed Mrs. Clayport.

"Is it true that Imogene is missing?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it is only too true," was the tearful response. "Oh! tell me, do you know anything about her? Have you seen her?"

"I have not seen her," was the reply, "nor do I know anything about her. It is news to me. You surely cannot suspect that I—"

"Oh! no! sir! not for a moment!" the woman cried. "I only thought perhaps you might have seen her."

"No, I have not, I assure you."

"Then where can she be? Oh! she must be found, gentlemen, she must be found!"

"And she shall be found!" Guydon exclaimed.

"Is there no clew to the mystery, nothing that can put us on the track?"

"Only this," said Stillwood, handing him the note.

Guydon took it and read it, and evinced the greatest amazement.

"What in all creation does this mean?" he exclaimed. "This is not your work, is it, Stillwood?"

"The writing, you mean?"

"Certainly."

"No; some infernal rascal has forged my name! Let me learn who he is, and it will not go well with him."

"I should think not. Where was this found?"

The matter was explained to him fully.

"Stillwood," he cried, "something has got to be done. What is Raspberry coming to, when neither life, person or property is safe? You have got to do something soon, or I vow I will appeal to the State authorities."

Sheriff Stillwood could hardly contain himself.

Strong was his temptation to arrest the rascal then and there, but he quickly reasoned that it would not pay to do so yet. He had proof against him that he had had some of the bank's stolen funds in his possession, and had gambled it away, and might have made it hot for him, but the time was not ripe.

Besides, if he knew where the missing girls were, to deprive him of liberty would but embarrass the search for them.

"You may do that as soon as you please, if you think that will help matters any," he returned. "You are not giving me a fair chance. I cannot be expected to do wonders at short notice. Let me promise you one thing, however, and that is this: I will put an end to this reign of terror in short order, when once I get the game well in hand."

"I hope you will, for we are anxious to see it, and anxious to see this county restored to something like order. You have been named 'Regulator of Raspberry,' we are waiting to see some regulating done."

Francis Oakbough almost trembled, so fearful was he that Stillwood would give way to the storm that he could see was raging in his breast.

But he did not. His response was again quiet.

"I will make no vain boasts," the sheriff returned, "but what I have already declared I mean to stand by. Of course you are willing to lend all the help you can in the interest of law and order."

"Most decidedly, sir! You can rely upon me, every time."

Only a little further followed, and the matter was dropped.

CHAPTER XXV.

BRINGING IN THE OUTLAW.

ONCE again was Raspberry in a tumult.

As soon as Deputy Dan and the others began to inquire about the missing girls, the news spread, and great excitement prevailed.

In an hour every possible effort had been made to get some clew to the mystery of their sudden disappearance, but without any result other than that of failure in every direction.

There was a howling mob on the main street, a mob almost as excited as that which had attempted to lynch Mr. Oakbough. Sheriff Stillwood's name was handled without gloves, and he was held responsible for everything that had happened. This was by the rowdy element alone, however, but that element made up a big portion.

Once again "Bull" Garry was in high feather. On the previous night he had whipped two "bad" men, and had recovered some of his lost ground in the favor of his compatriots.

"Yas, yas, yas," he bellowed, "you hear me, feller cits; this are all th' fault of this dude sher'f o' ours. If he was good fer anything he'd had th' outlaw in hand long ago, and all this trouble would be stopped."

"Then you think the outlaw had a hand in this?" some one demanded.

"Wal, as ter that I don't know, but it is likely enough that he had. He's bad enough fer anything, and until he's bagged there won't be any peace 'round here. Oh! I jest only wish that I was sher'f o' this county o' Raspberry, if I wouldn't make Rome howl, then you kin kick me. I'd have this outlaw in no time, and you heer me shout it that I would. Oh! but I'd jest beard th' ragin' lion in his den, drag him out by th' whiskers, and string him up to th' first tree that I kem to. Oh! jest elect me sher'f au' I'll show ye—"

"You are at liberty to try it, without bein' sheriff," broke in Deputy Dan, who happened along then. "It is the chance of your life to rake a fortune."

"Is that so?" the bully drawled. "Why ain't you after that fortune? What show has anybody else got, when you and th' rest of ye stands in th' way, not doin' anything yerselves nor lettin' anybody else have a whack at it?"

"Oh! the field is all clear for any one who wants to try a hand at it," Dan declared. "Go right in, Bull, and win all th' honors you want to."

Dan moved on, having no time to stop and

parley. "What is this town comin' to?" the bully continued to bawl. "No man's life ner property is safe, it ain't. What do we support a sher'f and a dozen men at his back fer, if this ain't never goin' ter be stopped? Ain't it about time that we dissolved ourselves inter a reg'lar old vigilance kermitty, and put Jedge Lynch on th' bench? It hits me hard that it is, feller cits, and I'm howlin' that we do it. I don't see no other way."

"Whoop! That's jest th' stuff!" chorused a number of his followers. "Bull is jest th' man ter lead us, too! Whoop her up, fellers, and if we don't clean up this matter in short order it will be 'cause we kaint, that's all!"

"Rah! How many of th' citerzens of this burg is willin' ter that?"

"Count me!"

"Me too!"

"Here!"

"Me!"

And so the wild cries rung out, and that part of the mob began to grow wild in its excitement.

"Who shall be yer chief?" demanded Garry.

"You!" was the great shout from his followers.

"Good enough; I 'cept th' posish, and we'll git right down ter biz, you bet yer lives! What shall be th' first thing on th' programme?"

"To capture th' outlaw!" shouted a voice from the outer edge of the crowd.

"It'll be ter shut off some of th' freshness of some fellers in this burg!" declared Bull, sharply. "I kin lick th' feller what hollered that, and I'm tellin' ye I kin! Walk right in and git it, Mister Man."

"Or ye might find th' missin' gals!" exclaimed another voice.

"Or put th' sher'f out o' office, and take th' hull thing right inter yer own hands," cried yet another.

"That would be jest th' ticket!" shouted a number of the rascally crew.

"When are you going to begin to do it?" asked a quiet voice.

Sheriff Stillwood had appeared upon the scene.

His appearance cooled the ardor of a good portion of the crowd.

"If you take my advice," the sheriff went on, "you will not undertake anything that will get you into trouble with the law, for if you do you will find out who is the sheriff of the county and who is not. Mind what I tell you."

Bull Garry looked around at his followers as though to see how many were to be counted on.

Seeing what he evidently considered enough to back him, he raised his voice.

"Jest you look here, sher'f," he yelled, "things has got ter take a change in this town, and don't you fergit it. We have stood it long enough. We have jest dissolved ourselves inter a vigilance kermitty, and I am th' chief. We are goin' ter try a little lynch-law here, in spite o' you or anybody else. Th' best thing you kin do is ter fall in with us, or keep still."

"Is that so?" coolly.

"It is jest so, and you kin 'pend on it. You want ter shut yer yaup-trap right up tight, and keep it so."

"When are you going to begin operations, and upon whom?"

"It wouldn't take much coaxin' ter set the boys on you, that's sure," the bully returned. "You are about as near no good as anybody, and we don't want anybody here what ain't no good. Hey, fellers?"

"There may be two sides to this matter," observed Stillwood. "One side is law and order, the other is outlaw and disorder. You are on the latter side. I have told you once before that there shall be no lynch-law here. I think you need cooling off, Mr. Garry."

"Hol do ye? Wal, now, don't you undertake ter do it, fer it will be bad fer ye if ye do. Me and th' rest of th' citizens knows what we are doin', and all we wants is ter be let alone. We ain't—"

Trouble would probably have followed soon, but an interruption came.

A horseman came dashing down the valley and into the town, waving his hat and yelling at the height of his voice.

All attention was immediately turned to him.

"Nigel's a prisoner! Nigel's a prisoner!" he shouted. "Th' great outlaw is gobbled at last!"

He came on and pulled his horse to a stop at the steps of the hotel.

"What's that you say?" demanded Stillwood.

"I say that the outlaw is captured," the man affirmed.

The excitement increased tenfold. Here was news indeed. Now there was likely to be one of the biggest "times" on record.

"Who captured him?" the sheriff inquired.

"Hen Gibbs and Buck Welch, of t'other side."

"Of t'other side" meant over the neighboring range of mountains and in the adjoining Territory.

"And where have they got him?"

"They're bringin' him in."

"Whoop! Hooray! Now fer fun in dead earnest!" yelled Mr. Bull Garry and his gang. "Now we'll have a hangin'-bee, one of th' real old sort, and I'd like ter see th' man what says we won't."

"You see him, then," declared the sheriff.

"You?"

"Yes, I. You want to understand once for all that law and order shall be maintained here, and any man who attempts to interfere to the contrary will be considered as an outlaw and dealt with accordingly."

"That's what you say."

"That is what I say, and if you want to find out whether I mean it or not, just try me when the time comes."

"Is this goin' ter be, fellers?" demanded the bully.

"No!"

"Yes! yes! Law and order!"

This cry came from the outer circle, and was as strong as the mob voice, or stronger.

"If ye kin stop that feller's mouth fer about a

minute," the stranger messenger observed, "I'd like ter say a word more."

"Well, what is it?" Stillwood asked.

"My pards, Hen and Buck, want it understood that they are ter have th' reward that's offered, or ye don't git th' prisoner."

"If the prisoner is really the outlaw," the sheriff promised, "they shall have the rewards."

"But, how are ye goin' ter prove his 'identity'?"

"Oh! we have seen him, and can easily recognize him. He has been here in Raspberry without disguise."

"Oh! then it will be easy enough. He is makin' out that he can't talk, and I reckon you'll have trouble wi' him if he means ter stick to it."

"We'll try to induce him to talk, I think."

"It makes no difference whether he talks or not!" cried Bull Garry, now in even more excitement than ever. "As soon as he shows his nose here he will run his head inter a rope, and that rope will elevate him higher than th' goose that's singed about. You hear me bawl, don't ye?"

Sheriff Stillwood turned away and blew a signal for his men.

Some of them were promptly at his side, and to them he said:

"Go and get your horses, and mine too, and arm yourselves to the teeth. We may have trouble here. Make haste."

This was said in undertone.

"All right," the men answered, and they hastened off to obey.

The sheriff then sprang up on the porch of the hotel, and spoke:

"Citizens," he said, "the first thing for us to do when this prisoner is brought in, is to identify him. If we find that he is the outlaw, then the next thing to be done with him is 'to lodge him safely in the jail. I want the support of every law-abiding citizen. Shall I have it?"

The response that was given was all that could be desired, though the mob element still "howled" for lynching.

In a few minutes the sheriff's posse appeared, armed with rifles and revolvers, bringing the sheriff's horse with them.

Stillwood sprang from the ground to the saddle, motioned his men into line, and in a loud voice directed:

"Men, we want to put this prisoner into the jail, if we find he is the outlaw as this man has told us he is. If this mob tries to interfere in any way, I shall order you to fire upon them, and I want you to shoot to kill!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE OUTLAW IN LIMBO.

THE sheriff's words had the desired effect.

There was a visible "petering out" of the courage of "Bull" Garry and his crew of followers.

Stillwood's tone and manner must have told them plainly that he meant business right out and out, and he most certainly did, and they were not eager to taste hot lead from those grim-looking rifles.

"That's it," muttered Bull, as he moved off to safe distance, "it is in favor of th' outlaw, every time. Hope he'll git away from 'em, and then mebbe th' sher'f will be sorry he didn't let us lynch him."

No further attention was paid to him.

"About how soon will your partners arrive?" asked the sheriff of the man who had brought in the startling information.

"Orter be heur mighty soon, I'd opine," was the response.

"How far off did you leave 'em?"

"Not more'n a mile."

All eyes were turned up the valley, and soon a shout arose.

Two horsemen were seen approaching at an easy canter, side by side and about a yard apart, and between them, on foot, was a man running.

As they drew nearer it was seen that each of the riders had a rope around the man's neck and fastened to the saddles of their horses. The man had his hands fastened behind his back.

"Whoa!" they sung out, as they dashed up into the crowd, and they came to a sudden stop and jerked their prisoner almost off his feet as they drew up on the ropes that held him.

The man was about out of breath, and seemed ready to drop from exhaustion.

"That's him! That's him!" was the shout from all who had seen the outlaw on the occasion of his visit to the gambling-hall, where Stillwood had attempted his capture, but failed.

"Yes, he it is," Stillwood agreed, "but he is about dead. Let up on your ropes, men, or you will have a dead prisoner on your hands instead of a live one."

"He deserves ter die," was the coarse return; "but if ye want him alive, why all right. Here's th' ropes."

"I'll take him alive rather than dead," was the response, and the sheriff took the ropes in hand.

"Ye'll do well ter string him right up, and that I'm tellin' ye," one of the captors advised.

"Jest what we want ter do," cried out some of the Garry party.

"And just what shall not be done," declared the sheriff, sternly. "Mind the warning I have given you. Now, men," turning to the captors, "tell us all about how you came to capture the fellow."

"Why, it was th' slickest thing you ever see in yer life, Mister Sher'f. He was asleep in the woods, on th' slope, and we kem onto him on-awares. We crept up on him, and when we had him dead ter rights, we wakened him, and thar he was. He hadn't room ter kick out, so here he is."

"And what have you got to say for yourself?" demanded the sheriff, turning to the prisoner.

There was no response, but the prisoner stared at him in a blank manner.

"Won't talk, eh?"

Still no response, but the blank stare.

There did not seem to be any mistaking the prisoner's identity. It was certainly the same man who had appeared in the gaming-hall, and who had lost such an amount of money to the gambler queen.

Now, of course, he was hatless and heated, and covered with dust, but he had on the same clothes he had had on that occasion.

"I opine if ye put them ropes over a limb and lift on 'em a leetle he'll find his tongue," one of the captors declared.

"There is plenty of time to make him talk," returned the sheriff. "The main thing now is to identify him beyond doubt."

"No doubt about th' feller," declared Deputy Dan.

"So I think," agreed the sheriff, "but it won't do any harm to let everybody have a chance to express an opinion."

That opinion was soon heard.

All who had seen him before were positive that he was the outlaw.

Indeed, there was no room to doubt, and this matter of proving his identity was a mere matter of form.

"If the other man was the outlaw," was the decision, "this man is he, and there was no doubt as to the identity of the man who had made so daring an escape from the gambling-hall."

Sheriff Stillwood passed one of the ropes to his deputy, and they started to the jail with the prisoner in the same manner in which he had been brought to town, the rest of the posse forming around them.

The jail was soon reached, and when the prisoner had been put into a cell, and the sheriff had posted six of his men on guard around the building, still mounted and armed, he rode back to the hotel.

A big portion of the crowd had followed to the jail, and they now followed back again to the hotel, where by this time the whole town was collected, and the street was almost blocked.

"Now," cried the leader of the captors, "if it is all th' same to you, sher'f, we'll take our reward."

"Very well, no doubt that will be arranged speedily. The parties who offered the rewards will no doubt be willing to pay you."

"Well, who are they, then, mister?"

"The Raspberry Bank, and the Consolidated Mining Company, and others. Of course you can't get it all in one day, and some of it may have to stand till the trial and conviction. You can afford to wait, however."

"Yas, but we don't want ter wait. We want th' boodle, and want ter amble right along on our way. No time ter fool around here."

"Well, we'll see the parties."

They had no distance to go to see some of them, for Mr. Guydon, the head of the mining company, was on the porch.

"There's no doubt about the identity of the prisoner, is there?" he asked.

"There seems to be none," the sheriff answered.

"Then let these men call at my office, and the reward will be paid over to them."

The general manager of the company moved away, and the men followed him.

They were hard-looking customers, the three of them, but looks do not always pronounce the man, so they passed muster.

At the mining office they received the reward that had been offered, and from there proceeded to the bank.

There, as the president of the concern was not on hand, they were told that they would have to wait a day or two until the matter could be arranged. This did not suit their ideas to any great degree, but they had to be content, and so took their leave, saying that they would call again in a week.

Soon after the outlaw had been put in jail, Sheriff Stillwood went in to see him, accompanied by ex-Sheriff Marsdon and Prosecutor Spangle.

They found the prisoner on the rude bunk, sleeping.

This was something unlooked-for, but they laid it to the account of his being completely fagged out.

While they were debating as to whether to awaken him or not, one of the jailers hurried in to announce to the sheriff that a woman was outside wanting to see Mr. Oakbough.

Stillwood ordered her admitted, and when she

entered the corridor in front of the cells, those who saw her gave a start of amazement. The woman had a close veil over her face, but in dress she was—the dead Mrs. Oakbough!

Advancing to the sheriff, she said:

"I desire to see Mr. Oakbough, if I may, sir."

"Who are you?" the sheriff asked.

"That I prefer not to tell," was the response. "You may accompany me to the cell, and watch me, to see that I mean the gentleman no harm."

"Very well, come on."

Stillwood led the way, motioning to his companions to do nothing about the new prisoner till he returned, and opening the door of the cell in which Mr. Oakbough was confined, he allowed the woman to step within, following right after her.

If any sort of treachery was intended, he was prepared for it.

The woman did not speak, but stood before Mr. Oakbough with folded hands and stately mien, looking down at him as he reclined upon his rude couch.

Mr. Oakbough's eyes were fairly starting, and his mouth stood agape.

Who was this woman?

The half-bewildered gentleman looked at her from head to foot, surveyed her in like manner yet once again, his eyes growing more and more frightened in their look, and at the end of a moment he sprung up, crying:

"Heavens! Is it you, Marion, and alive!"

Slowly the woman unfolded her hands, and slowly raising her right arm until her finger pointed straight at the trembling man, she uttered, in a hollow voice, the one word—

"Murderer!"

"No! no!" the man cried, "I am no murderer! As heaven is my witness, I am innocent. I did not do the deed."

"Then you know who did, Byron Oakbough."

"No, no, I swear that I do not."

"But, you will hang for the crime."

"I cannot help it, I will hang an innocent man. But, who are you? Tell me, I beg of you, who you are."

"I am the spirit of one seeking vengeance," was the hollow response, and the woman turned and stepped from the cell.

"Detain her!" Mr. Oakbough exclaimed. "She must, she shall, tell who she is! She is clad in my wife's clothes, unless I greatly mistake."

The woman's response was a light laugh, and seeing that she was moving away from the cell, Stillwood hurriedly closed the door and went after her.

He overtook her just as she was about to pass through the door at the end of the corridor.

"I must know who you are," he said, laying a detaining hand on her shoulder.

"And I cannot tell you now," was the response. "Please allow me to go."

"Not until I have seen your face. Are you Rhoda Oakbough? Tell me, or I shall be forced to lift your veil to see."

"No, I am not Rhoda Oakbough. Let me pass, please."

Stillwood was determined. With a quick motion he lifted the veil, and for one brief instant saw the face of the wearer.

CHAPTER XXVII.

RATHER A SURPRISE PARTY.

SHERIFF STILLWOOD uttered an exclamation. "You!" was the word that fell from his lips.

"Yes, I," was the response, as with a quick motion the veil was returned to its place.

"And who—what?"

"Ask no questions now, sir. In due time you will understand."

"Very well, I take your word for it. Pardon me for my action. You know I could not well let you go away unknown."

"I did not imagine that you would, and hence I pardon you."

With that the woman went out, and the sheriff returned to Marsdon and Spangle.

"Who was she?" they asked.

"I cannot tell you now," the sheriff answered. "Is our man awake yet?"

"Yes, he is awake now."

"Very good, let's see what can be got out of him."

Stillwood opened the door, and, revolver in hand, stepped in.

The prisoner was sitting up on the edge of the bunk, looking at them vacantly as ever. There did not seem to be any too bright an intellect behind the staring eyes, bright as they were.

Stillwood looked at him keenly.

"Who and what are you?" he demanded.

Nothing but that vacant stare was his answer. It nettled him, and he repeated the inquiry, in louder tone.

But still no response. The man seemed not to hear. If playing a part, he was doing it well. And of course he was playing, for his identity was not to be questioned.

The sheriff raised his revolver and aimed at his heart.

"Speak!" he ordered.

The prisoner's face might have been cut from

stone, so far as any change of expression in it was to be seen.

Stillwood lowered the weapon, and turning to the others, demanded:

"What do you make of this, gentlemen? What are we going to do with the fellow, to make him talk?"

"It looks as though his mind is fully made up not to open his mouth," commented the ex-sheriff. "Perhaps a few days' confinement will do him good in that direction and make him more willing to talk."

"It is only a few days, now, till the meeting of the grand jury," reminded Spangle, and he waved his hand with an air of indifference; "if he won't talk now, perhaps he may be induced to do so then."

The time of court was, indeed, only a little way off. The crime that was laid to Mr. Oakbough's charge would be settled soon after its commission, it happening at the time it did.

"May I request you to go out, and leave me alone with him for a little time?" the sheriff asked.

This was agreed to at once, and Stillwood was left alone in the cell with the stubborn prisoner.

He partly closed the door, and placing a stool in the corner near the door, sat down and fixed his eyes upon those of the prisoner.

It was to test the power of those shining orbs. He remembered how they had mesmerized him on one occasion, and he meant to give them the chance to do it again.

Eyes met eyes, and for some seconds the gaze was steadily maintained. But it was not for long. Those of the outlaw began to look "watery," and he turned them away.

Stillwood was surprised. This did not look much as though the man had the power to mesmerize. But, then, perhaps he had no desire to exercise that power now.

But, as the sheriff paid close attention to the man's eyes for some moments longer, and found that they positively refused to meet his own again, for more than a glance of a second, a suspicion formed in his mind.

Once that suspicion was there, Stillwood leaned forward and studied the man even more closely than ever.

Was he the outlaw?

It could hardly be doubted that he was, but still there was now the question to be answered: If not, who could he be?

He left the cell, locking the door with care, and set out to find his deputy.

Deputy Dan was in the office, with Marsdon, Spangle, and several others.

"How did you make out?" Spangle demanded.

"Not at all," was the response. "The fellow is as dumb as an oyster."

And having answered the question, Stillwood motioned Dan to step with him into the jail proper.

The deputy followed, and when the door was closed after them, Stillwood asked of him:

"Dan, do you really believe that we have got the outlaw into our hands?"

The deputy was amazed.

"Why," he exclaimed, in the same guarded tone the sheriff had employed, "it can't be anybody else, can it?"

"I don't know; that is what I want to talk with you about."

Stillwood went ahead, then, and laid the matter before his right-hand man in the same light in which he saw it himself.

"It does look queer, an' that's th' fact," Dan agreed. "Have you mentioned this to any one else?"

"No, not to any one."

"That's good. It is somethin' that I can't understand. It don't seem possible that there could be two men so nearly alike, and yet we have heard of such things before. Still, if it is not that, and if it really is th' outlaw, then I agree with you that somethin' is going to happen."

"That is just the idea. There is some deviltry afoot, and I'd like to know what it is. Steps must be taken to prevent any funny-work around the jail to-night. I shall put on twenty watchmen, and pay them out of my own pocket, if necessary. This jail shall not be broken out of nor into."

"That is a good idea. Whatever it is, hinges on th' outlaw himself, and it is some of his doin's that he is here, and that I'll bet on."

"By the way, where are the men who brought him here?"

"I guess they have sloped out."

"If they haven't, I'll arrest them and hold them on suspicion. If they are all right, the rewards they will get will repay them, and if all wrong, then we will have them. I'm only sorry that I didn't think of this sooner."

"Yes, that's so. But, then, you hadn't the suspicion then."

"True enough."

They went out, and the next half-hour was spent in looking for the men, but without making too open inquiries. But they were not found, and finally it was learned that they had taken their leave of the town the way they had come.

The day passed without further excitement, except that "Bull" Garry got very drunk and proceeded to hold a Judge Lynch court in the

middle of the street, with a prisoner that was imaginary.

Nothing was learned of the two ladies who had so mysteriously disappeared, and as no clew whatever was to be had concerning their whereabouts, nothing could be done more than had been done already.

Men had been sent out in every direction to search for them, but as night drew on they began to return with the sad news that they had discovered nothing of them.

And so the day passed.

With the suspicion firmly grounded in his mind that all was not right, that his prisoner was either shamming for a purpose, or was not Night-time Nigel at all, Sheriff Stillwood meant to be prepared for any emergency that the night might bring forth.

Twenty men were sworn in as officers, and the jail was put under their care, with trusty Joe Russel at their head.

With no further concern in that direction, Stillwood made his other arrangements with freedom.

It was his resolve that if Night-time Nigel was not a prisoner, but entered the town that night, as he had done before, he should not escape alive if he could help it.

His men had all been carefully instructed, and nothing remained but to carry out the plans.

The evening passed quietly.

The "Queen of Sheba" and her dinky servant were on hand in the Palace Saloon again, but no heavy playing was done by any one that could arouse suspicion.

Perhaps the most anxious persons in the town were Mrs. Clayport, Francis Oakbough, and Sheriff Stillwood.

Their concern was for the missing girls. And it made it all the harder for them when they reflected how utterly helpless they were to render them any help, if help they needed.

It was on this night, too, that the shipment of bullion from the mining company was to be put in the stage as it stood in the yard of the hotel.

When the evening had been spent, and the town slept, there were some who were wide awake.

Of course the score of watchers at the jail were so, but there were others besides. In dark places, on both sides of the main street, here and there, was a mounted horseman. And in the deep shadows in the rear of the Seven Stars stables were four more.

These were Sheriff Stillwood and his men.

Let the outlaw or his men appear on this night, and they would meet with a warm reception.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when three or four dark forms stole out from the rear of the mining office, and made their way to the hotel yard where the stage stood.

They carried a box with them, and that box was put inside the stage and left there, and one of the men remained there with it, the others returning as silently as they had come.

Silence reigned again, and it was some time before it was broken.

It was half-past three, probably, when a band of horsemen, with the feet of their horses muffled so that they made no sound, approached the hotel yard from the rear, having evidently come into the valley from the south, and skirted along the outlying hills in order to gain that position.

Silently they drew up around the stage, two dismounted, and then—a loud, shrill whistle was heard, and Sheriff Stillwood and his men burst upon them from cover, firing as they came, and yelling like demons themselves.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DESPERATE STREET FIGHT.

It was a genuine surprise.

For a brief moment consternation seized the outlaws.

But soon a commanding voice ordered them to mount, and they wheeled and sped swiftly away.

And as they did so, they turned in their saddles and fired at the daring four who had attacked them. But there were two of their number left lying on the ground, dead.

There were about twelve or fourteen of the outlaws, however, and all of them turning and firing at their pursuers, they made short work of them. Two of the sheriff's men were tumbled from their saddles, and two of the horses went down in their tracks.

One of these horses was that of the sheriff, and he narrowly escaped being caught fast as the animal fell. Escape he did, however, and quickly sprung for one of the other horses.

Catching it, he vaulted into the saddle, and was again in hot pursuit, his whistle between his teeth and a shrill signal sounding.

The outlaws had wheeled into the main street, and were dashing up the valley at full speed.

But they were not to get off scot free.

The sheriff's men, stationed at different points, darted out after them as they flew by, pouring after them a rain of lead that was demoralizing and fatal. The wild riders tumbled out of their saddles, and more than one horse went down.

But the fight was by no means one-sided.

The sheriff's men fared ill, too, and they and

their horses went down almost as fast as those of the outlaw band.

But they showed no fear. Stillwood dashed on at the best speed of the animal he rode, still sounding his whistle signal, and ere long he was ahead of his men and they dared not fire again for fear of hitting him.

The rifles of the posse had done terrible work. Before the outlaws were at the end of the street their number had been reduced half, and Stillwood continued to fire after them.

So far luck had favored him. He had not been hit once, though he had had some close calls. One bullet had gone through his hat, another had bit his sleeve, and still another had grazed the leg of his right boot.

Another of the outlaws tumbled from the saddle under the sheriff's aim, and another horse went down, and then the end came. The horse the sheriff rode received a bullet in the breast, reared high in the air and then dropped to the earth dead.

The fight was over.

Of that band of outlaws, only about six got away alive, and some of them were wounded.

Night-time Nigel had received his first severe chastisement.

But, the question was, was he with his men, or was he in the jail? Had he been killed, or had he escaped? Had it been the intention of his men to rescue him out of the jail, or was the prisoner some one else?

As soon as the sheriff got upon his feet, after his second horse went down, he sounded his whistle, and all of his men who had been able to get another mount, came running up.

There were only four of them!

"Heavens!" Stillwood exclaimed, "where are the others? Did they all go down under the fire?"

"A good many of them did," answered Dan Horton. "We got a bad dose. It is too bad we couldn't wipe 'em all out."

"We gave them as bad a dose as they gave us, though, and that is some satisfaction. We must look around and see how we stand."

By this time the town was astir, and people were crowding into the street.

The familiar voice of "Bull" Garry was heard, bawling:

"Whar, oh! whar is our dude sher-riff?
Whar, oh! whar is he?
Under th' bed and skart 'most dead;
That is whar he be!"

"He is, hey?" snapped the ex-sheriff, who was near the bully. "I'll bet he ain't, then! Wouldn't wonder if the poor fellow is dead, though."

"Dead! Not him! You wouldn't ketch him gittin' whar he was likely ter git hit. He's lookin' out fer Number One, every time, he is. He'll show up soon, and he'll make us think he's been right in th' hottest of it, you see if he don't."

"Whar, oh! whar is—"

"That's more than you can do, anyhow," Marsdon retorted. "We all know where you was."

"And whar was I? Come, whar was I? Wasn't I out and firin' at 'em right in th' hottest of th' diffikilty? Wasn't I in—"

"In bed—yes, that's where ye was! Ye ain't sober yet."

But, no one had time to parley with him. Lights were being brought out, and willing hands were looking after the dead and wounded.

The excitement knew no bounds, when the story of the fight was made known, and a whooping cheer was sent up for Stillwood, when it was found that he was not hurt, but was hard at work caring for his brave men.

Five of the poor fellows had been killed outright, and three were badly wounded. These were Ned Bradley, Bob Walker and Charlie Dayton.

Of the outlaws, six were found dead, and two others so badly wounded that they could not live. One of them died soon after, and the other in about an hour.

Stillwood tried to make this man confess where the secret retreat of the band was, but the fellow would not tell anything.

The wounded horses had been killed, and so put out of their pain.

Night-time Nigel was not among the number of the outlaws who had been cut short in their career, and it was not wondered at, of course, considering that he was in the jail.

This was the public view of it. It was believed that the outlaws had come into town with the purpose of breaking into the jail, and so scoring a more daring exploit than any they had thus far made.

In the minds of the sheriff and his deputy, however, there was the question of doubt. Was the outlaw still at large? or was he indeed their prisoner?

By the time the bodies had been laid out on the hotel porch, the whole town was in the street, and the outlaws were exposed for identification.

Two of them were soon recognized. One was a man who had been employed by the mining company, and another was a well-known character in the town—a fellow who had always had

plenty of money without the seeming necessity of working for it.

"That explains a good deal of this mystery," cried Lance Guydon, as he pointed his finger at the man who had been in the employ of the mine. "He has been the spy who has kept the outlaw informed."

"And this other, too, has had a share in the same work," cried the new superintendent.

"It is to be hoped that this will prove a check upon the rascals for a time," remarked Francis Oakbough.

"It kin easy be done," bellowed Mr. Bull Garry, "if th' sher'f will only try a little lynch-law on th' chief of th' gang. Now is jest th' ripe time ter string him up; hey, fellers? It will be jest sweet revenge fer th' good fellers his men has laid out. What d'ye say?"

"That is jest what we wants!" some of the wild spirits of the crowd agreed. "Fetch him out, sher'f, and see how quick we'll do him up fer plantin'!"

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Stillwood retorted.

"Ruther give him a chance ter escape, hey?" demanded Bull.

"He is welcome to escape, if he can do so," answered the sheriff. "He is a better man than I take him to be, if he can get out of there, with twenty armed men stationed around him."

The bully did some growling, but finally went off, and was heard singing:

"Whar, oh! whar was our dude sher-riff?
Whar, oh! whar was he?
Ther bullets war scootin' thick as hail,
But he kem off quite free!"

Stillwood paid no attention to him. It was not worth his while to do so, and he had more important business on hand.

It was not long till daylight dawned, and then the outlaws were prepared for burial. Their effects were preserved, and their identity made out as nearly as possible, and they were laid to rest in mother earth.

The public sentiment was that they received more respect than they deserved, but the respect shown them was scanty enough.

With the sheriff's men it was different. They were buried with all the honor and respect that could be shown them, and were laid away like men who had "died in their boots" deserved.

Sheriff Stillwood felt the loss of his men keenly, but sentiment had no place where business and duty were concerned, and he set about choosing men to fill the places of those he had lost, and soon had his "dozen" complete again.

With them he set out to see if he could trail the remnant of the outlaw band to their lair.

At first there was a trail of blood to follow, but that soon came to an end, and where it ended the body of another outlaw was discovered.

No one in the posse knew him, and he was laid aside out of the road, to be carried to Raspberry for burial on their return.

They pressed on for a number of miles, making inquiries of every person they fell in with, but all to no purpose, and they were obliged to return without having gained their point.

Up to this time nothing had been heard from the missing girls. An additional force of men had been sent out to search for them, but as they had no clow to work on their search was almost hopeless.

Mrs. Clayport was almost crazed by the absence of Imogene, and Stillwood and young Oakbough were little better.

One of the most active men in ordering the search was Lance Guydon. He was here, there and everywhere, making inquiries himself and urging everybody else to put forth an effort.

Stillwood had paid another visit to his prisoner, the outlaw, but the man still refused to speak. No amount of threat would induce him to open his lips. He gave only that meaningless stare, in answer to everything.

Afternoon came, and the hour for the departure of the stage was at hand.

That lumbering vehicle rolled around from the stable-yard, and then for the first time the sheriff remembered the treasure that it held.

Apparently, too, it had slipped the minds of the Guydons, for just as Stillwood remembered it they came hurrying up from the mine-office.

Advancing to the stage they threw open the door and felt in under the seat where the box had been put, and immediately uttered exclamations of surprise.

The box was gone!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DUMB MESSENGER.

ANOTHER bubble of excitement.

What had become of that box of bullion?

The Guydons, father and son, looked at the driver.

He had been paid to sleep in the stage and watch the box.

"Is ther box gone?" the driver demanded.

"Yes, it is gone," was the response, "and we demand to know where it is."

"Wal, you'll have ter ask somebody what knows, then."

"Don't you know?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"But, you were paid to watch it."

"And so I did, too. I can't understand it a tall."

"Wasn't you out of the stage after it was put there?"

"I was out, you kin bet your life I was, after th' sher'f jumped th' outlaws and th' fight begun. I wanted ter see ther fun, and nothin' was goin' ter stop me, neither. 'Sides, what was th' danger, then? Who was goin' ter steal it?"

"Somebody did steal it, nevertheless," snapped Lance, "and it must have been done then. How long were you out of the stage?"

"Fact is," the driver owned, "I didn't go back no more, that is—not ter sleep. I didn't think about th' box any more, fer of course I 'sidered that th' danger was all over when th' tempt had been made ter steal it and had been bu'sted."

"Well, you are a hearty one, I must say!" cried the elder Guydon. "What were you paid to do, anyhow?"

"Wal, if it's gone I'm sorry, but I ain't responsible, that's sure. It was your risk anyhow, though I had no idea o' lettin' it git taken. I done my duty till th' danger was over, or what anybody would 'a' called over."

"Sheriff Stillwood, what is going to be done about this?" demanded Lance.

"I give it up," was the response.

"I'll have the driver arrested, that's what will be done," snapped the old man. "My suspicion is that he knows more about this than he is willing to tell."

The driver advanced toward the speaker, whip in hand, and with a dark look on his face.

"You take that back, old man," he ordered, "or it will be wuss fer ye. You don't want ter go fer ter say that I know anything about yer boodle. I have a clean record, I have, and I don't mean ter allow you ter put a dark mark on it."

Guydon backed away, his face pale.

"Well, I will take it back, of course," he said, "but it is strange."

"Let it be strange, but you don't want ter say that I know anything about it, fer I don't. I'm sorry, but that won't mend it now."

It was peculiar, to say the least. That box had certainly been in the stage at the time that the outlaws made their attack upon it, and it was not there now. What had become of it?

Some further parley was had about it, and the stage started.

The Guydons returned toward their office, talking earnestly and shaking their heads in a business-like fashion.

Sheriff Stillwood had his own ideas about it, but he knew that the time was not ripe yet to make any suspicions known.

When the stage had gone he and his deputy went to the office at the jail, and there they talked the matter over at length. New moves had to be made in the game, but what were they to be?

They had been talking for some time when they were annoyed by the loud yelping and whining of a dog that was making a great fuss at the jail door.

"What's th' matter with that cur?" demanded Dan. "I wonder if a pill of lead wouldn't do him good."

About the time that he said this, one of the jailers made the attempt to drive the animal away, but it was an attempt in vain. No sooner was the door opened than the dog sprang in, almost knocking the jailer down.

Once within, it ran to the second door, which was of iron open-work, and there began to make more fuss than ever.

"There is something funny about this," observed Stillwood; "let's see what it means."

"I begin to think so, too," agreed Dan.

They stepped into the corridor, and there was the dog, standing on his hind feet and looking through, whining and yelping desperately.

And, too, some one was whistling within the jail, as though calling the animal.

The jailer was just rushing back, with a weapon in hand, and only for the sheriff the dog would have been lifeless in no time.

"Hold!" Stillwood exclaimed; "open the door and let him in, and we'll see what all this fuss is about."

The jailer obeyed, and as soon as the door was open the dog dashed in and made straight for the cell where the outlaw was confined.

"It must be his dog," the sheriff commented, "and it has just— But, hal! I see a note is tied to his neck!"

The dog had a collar on, and on the under side of that, with its edges just visible, was a white paper. And a closer look showed that it was secured with a piece of thread.

Stillwood advanced and laid his hand on the dog's collar, but the animal snapped at him so viciously that he was glad to draw back.

"He don't mean to let us have it," he observed.

"So it seems."

The man in the cell had risen and come forward to the grated door, and he and the dog were making the greatest ado imaginable, evidently mutually pleased at seeing each other.

The man uttered no words, but voiced a

CHAPTER XXX.

STILLWOOD ON THE TRACK.

peculiar whine that was not unlike that uttered by the dog.

"Say," observed Stillwood, "I believe the fellow is dumb?"

"Just what I was going to say," agreed Dan.

Stillwood opened the door of the cell, and the dog leaped in, beginning to lick the hands of the prisoner in a most affectionate manner.

The sheriff entered, too, and sat down on the stool in the corner.

He knew one thing now, and suspected another. He knew that the man could hear, and he suspected that he was dumb.

As soon as the animal had ceased its show of gladness and affection, it turned to the sheriff and sniffed about him, and Stillwood gently touched the animal's head.

This was not resented, now that the dog was with its master, and in a moment more the sheriff had the collar from its neck with the note attached to it.

Holding it up, he allowed the prisoner to see it.

The man's eyes opened wide, and he put out his hand for it, but Stillwood drew back and stepped out, closing the door.

Taking his knife he cut the threads that bound the paper to the leather strap and unfolded it.

The paper contained writing, and at sight of the signature at the bottom of it Stillwood uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" asked the deputy.

"A note from Imagine Clayport!" was the answer.

"It is nothing else."

With eager haste the sheriff proceeded to read it.

It was as follows:

"TO THE FINDER:—

"Go at once for help to Raspberry. Tell Sheriff John Stillwood, of that place, that we, Imagine Clayport and Rhoda Oakbough, are prisoners in the hands of the outlaw Night-time Nigel. We cannot tell where we are, but can give one point: When we were brought here our horses were made to swim for a distance, in the Raspberry River, we think. We are in a sort of cave. Near us is a dog, tied, but straining and howling to get free. At the first chance we intend to put this in his collar and let him go. We are safe from harm so far, but beg for help. Come to our rescue!"

"IMAGINE CLAYPORT."

"There! what do you think of that?" the sheriff demanded, after he had read it aloud in a low voice.

"We know where the girls are, if nothing more."

"Yes, but how are we to find that cave?"

"That is the puzzle."

"Can't we make the dog take us there?"

"Not unless its master goes with it, and no knowing how that would work. He might fool us in the worst way."

"But, something has got to be done, and that without delay, now. That cave must be found and the young ladies rescued."

"Your head is all right in saying that, Dan, but there has got to be some thinking done to lay the plan of action. This clue is only a very faint one, and how to follow it is a puzzler."

"Faint as it is, though, it is something."

Stillwood was thoughtful for a moment, and evidently trying hard to see light ahead.

Suddenly he brightened up, and opening the door of the cell, stepped within and handed the note to the prisoner.

The man took it with a look of surprise, and looked at the writing. He had the sheet upside-down, but did not seem to note the difference.

In a moment he handed it back with a shake of the head.

"Can't you read it?" Stillwood asked.

The fellow shook his head No.

"It was the first answer he had made to anything since he had been a prisoner."

The sheriff was encouraged, and sat down on the stool.

"See here," he spoke, not unkindly, "are you dumb?"

A nod in the affirmative.

"And can neither read nor write?"

A negative.

"Who are you, what are you doing here, and where are you from?"

The only answer was that blank stare.

The sheriff now began to understand that. Unable to talk, and unable to read or write, the man was utterly unable to communicate his ideas to a stranger unless in the form of answers to questions that could be answered by yes or no.

"See here," Stillwood exclaimed, "we want to find the cave where the outlaw has had his headquarters. The outlaws were wiped out last night, but they left some prisoners there whom we want to rescue. Will you guide us there?"

The shake of the head that answered was a plain no.

"If you will do it," was the promise, "we will set you free, and you shall not be harmed. You shall go away in peace, taking your dog with you."

At this there was no response, and the sheriff hoped that he had struck the right note.

THERE was a pause.

"Will you do it?" the sheriff asked.

The man made a motion with his hand to indicate hanging.

"You are afraid of some one, if you do it?" Stillwood inquired.

The response to this, in the dumb way, was in the affirmative, and the sign was repeated.

"Whom are you afraid of?"

To this the man could not respond, and hence the stare, in the usual way.

Stillwood felt that he had made a big point, in getting the fellow to make any response at all, and resolved not to spoil it if he could help.

"See here," he said, "I now know that you are not Nigel the Outlaw. Is it of him that you are afraid?"

"Yes," in the dumb way as before.

"Hal now we are getting on. Listen, my man, that fellow is beyond doing you harm, for we will protect you. Last night broke his power, and—"

The prisoner interrupted with a sign. He motioned, and then laid his head back for a brief moment as though to pretend dead. Then he opened his eyes with a questioning look.

Stillwood correctly guessed his meaning.

"Do you ask if he is dead?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"No, he is not. But that need make no difference to you. Guide us to his retreat, and you shall suffer no harm. You shall be protected, and not only that, but rewarded."

The man shook his head in the negative, and again indicated hanging.

And no amount of pleading or threatening would make him change his purpose.

After a thorough trial Stillwood left the cell in disgust, closing the door sharply, and he and Dan adjourned to the office.

"Balked!" the sheriff muttered, with an imprecation.

"It looks that way," the deputy agreed.

"And now, what is to be done?"

"Force the fellow to take us there. That is the only way that I can see now."

"And the only way that I can see, too, but I do not know how it is going to be accomplished. There is no way of doing it, so far as I can think."

Both remained thoughtful for some time, but no plan presented itself to them; at any rate, none that they considered feasible.

And the afternoon was speeding along toward night.

While they were still in the office, and without having devised any plan that could be carried out, the door opened and Joe Russel came into the room.

"Well," he announced, "I've got a point at last."

"Hal!" exclaimed Stillwood, "what is it?"

"Lance Guydon and th' new super have had a confab, and yours truly got onto some of it. I tell you they are both bad ones, and no discount on it."

"What did you learn?"

"They are goin' ter set out for some place ter-night, when th' town is in th' usual evenin' blaze of excitement, but where they are goin' I couldn't catch. I have an idee though that they know where th' missin' girls is, and that they are goin' ter see them."

"Just the thing!" cried Stillwood. "I will follow them!"

"It will take a heap o' nerve and skill, sher'f."

"Well, I have just a little of both, and I'll try to make it reach as far as it will."

"And will you go alone?" asked Dan.

"I do not see how it can be arranged otherwise," was the response to that. "A number of men cannot go, for they would be discovered. And even as it is I do not know that I can follow them without being seen."

"But you are determined to try it, at any cost, eh?"

"Yes, that is settled. And you, Dan, are to have charge of things here during my absence. You can depend on my returning, unless I go under, and in that case my absence will tell its own story."

They talked on, the plan was finally arranged to the satisfaction of all, and Stillwood set about preparing things for his adventure.

Night came, and it was a wild one.

A storm had been brewing all day, and as the sun went down the storm burst with fury.

Stillwood had given his deputy all instructions, and when darkness settled down it found him with his horse ready for the trail.

The animal's hoofs were muffled, and it and its master waited under shelter of one of the outer mining buildings, not far from the office, but in the deep shadows where they could not be observed.

Stillwood was enveloped in a rubber coat, and hat to match, so the storm had but little terror for him.

Time passed, but after awhile a another dark shadow crept around under the shed where the sheriff waited.

It was Joe Russel, the sheriff's spy.

When he came under the shed he stopped and

gave a low chirp, a signal that had been agreed upon, and Stillwood, answering it, he advanced, feeling his way, till he came to where the horse was standing.

"What is the word?" Stillwood asked.

"They're about startin'. They are goin' this way, and will soon go past here."

"All right, I'll be ready to follow. Mind that you guard the jail well."

"You can trust me fer that."

Russel went away again, and Stillwood continued his careful watch.

In a little while he heard horses approaching, at a walk, and as soon as they had passed the place of his vigil he set out to follow.

As he could see but little in the darkness, he had to trust mostly to his sense of hearing to guide him aright. But that sense was keen, and he had little trouble in keeping on the trail.

He could ride reasonably close, too, for the darkness favored him as much as opposed him.

As the first diverging trail was approached, the sheriff pushed closer to be sure which way the two men went, and finding that they kept to the main road, he felt easier.

Now they would have to continue several miles before another fork would be reached.

Stillwood could hear the two men talking as they rode along, but could not distinguish anything they said. The storm continued, and the night was bad enough to serve the purpose of any sort of evil design.

The sheriff's horse was well muffled, so he could ride without fear of being heard by those he pursued.

Finally the second diverging trail was reached, and Stillwood exercised care to make sure which way the men went.

They kept straight on, as the outlaws had done on the occasion when they cut off pursuit by felling a tree into the canyon.

Red Rock Canyon was reached at length, and passed, and after that came another trail that left the main road and wound away to the south.

Here the two men turned, leaving the road for the trail.

Stillwood followed, and now he had to exercise the greatest caution. The trail was a wild and rugged one, and he was none too well acquainted with it.

His every sense was on the alert, and his ears were put to a constant strain to guide him aright.

He could still hear the men talking, but caught no words, nor did he expect to do so; but suddenly the talking became more distinct, and he found that the men had come to a stop.

Half a dozen yards further and he would have run into them!

Silently he drew his own horse to a stop, and waited, fearful lest at any moment his horse should whinny or sneeze, and so make known his presence.

"Are you sure about the way?" he heard Burbank inquire.

"Yes, I am sure enough about it," responded Guydon, "but it is so infernal dark. I must light the lantern here. We are off the main road, and it is not likely to be seen."

"Do you think you can light it?"

"I have got to do it if possible."

Stillwood was uneasy now. If they lighted a lantern, and chanced to look in his direction, he would be discovered. He laid his hand on a revolver, and waited.

Presently there was a flicker of light for a moment, but it went out. Then followed another and another, and many more.

Guydon was heard to swear impatiently, but presently his efforts were rewarded and the lantern was lighted.

It proved to be of the bull's-eye type, and luckily it was not turned in the direction of the watching man.

They started on.

Now Stillwood could not miss them. The light of the lantern gleamed ahead of them, and he could follow that. He dropped a little more in the rear, now that he could do so, but followed determinedly.

For several miles they continued, and finally came to the Raspberry River.

Here they stopped, at the bank of the stream, and the sheriff halted at a safe distance in their rear.

The river was full, owing to the storm, and if it was their intention to swim their horses into the current, it looked like risky work. And what, from what the note from Imagine Clayport had revealed, the sheriff believed to be their purpose.

"Dare you venture it?" asked Burbank.

"Dare I think I would turn back now?" replied Guydon. "We will swim it or drown in the attempt."

"Well, you will find that I won't be behind you far."

"Faint heart, fair lady, and the rest of it, you know."

They laughed, and after a few minutes' pause descended to the edge of the water and urged their horses in.

Stillwood waited to let them get a start, so that his horse would not be heard, and then boldly followed their lead. His heart was

beating high with the excitement of the moment and the discoveries he expected to make ere long.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE OUTLAW STRONGHOLD.

It was certainly a thrilling experience.

Stillwood was a man of many adventures, but this one seemed to take the lead of them all for strangeness.

Nor was it without danger. Let him be discovered and taken off his guard, and his life would pay the forfeit for his boldness.

The horse he rode proved a good swimmer, and with the light flashing on the water ahead the sheriff had no trouble about keeping to the course.

They were going down the stream, and at the same time crossing diagonally to the opposite bank. The current was pretty strong, but flowed evenly, and the swimming was rendered easy in that direction.

The trail, by the way, did not end at the point where the men had entered the water. It bent to the West and followed up-stream. This point was a favorite place for teamsters and others on that trail to water their horses, and tracks leading into the water there had had no other significance until now.

The two men continued down the stream for about a quarter of a mile, or perhaps something less, now keeping close to the right bank, and Guydon was flashing his lantern along in search of the landing-place.

A high wall of rock bordered the river just there, and it looked like a most unfavorable place to expect to find a landing, but presently one was found, and the two men turned their horses out of the water and were soon upon a narrow strip of sand at the base of the rocks.

There they stopped a moment, and then continued on their way down along the stream, until finally they turned and the light disappeared suddenly.

Stillwood pushed ahead, and when he came to the place where he had last seen the light, he caught a glimmer of it again a little distance away to the right. And by it he saw that the men had entered a fissure in the rocky wall that was about wide enough to admit horse and rider.

Without hesitation he followed on, ready for any emergency that could be expected, his trusty five-shooter being in his grasp.

Not far had he proceeded in this direction when he heard a challenge.

He stopped short, but the challenge was not for him. It was to the two men ahead.

"Who comes there?" was the demand.

"Friends, on business," was the prompt answer.

"Give the pass-word, then."

Stillwood heard no more, but the pass-word was evidently all right, for the two rode on.

Here was a bad snag in the way. How was he to get by, not knowing anything about the pass-word?

No time was to be lost, and whatever he did had to be done in haste.

Waiting a few moments, to let the others get ahead beyond hearing, he advanced boldly.

He looked for the same challenge that had been given to the others, and was prepared for it. He would respond as they had done, but when he leaned over to give the word that would admit him he would deal the man a crashing blow on the head with the butt of his revolver instead.

But much to his surprise, he was not challenged at all.

He could not understand this, but pushed on, and in a few moments found that he was under shelter from the storm, and in a moment more that he was at the end of his journey.

He heard many voices, and stopped just in time to prevent riding right into a big cave where several men and a number of horses were standing.

Silently and speedily the sheriff turned, and retraced his way out of the place the same as he had entered it.

He had no business there mounted, as he quickly realized. If he lost his horse he would be in a bad plight.

Once out of the narrow pass, and again on the bank of the stream, he rode a little further down and made his horse fast to some strong bushes that grew in a little nook just off the trail and in the friendly shelter of the overhanging rock.

This took time, in the darkness, but it was finally accomplished, and then Stillwood retraced his steps to the opening and entered on foot.

He proceeded with care and caution, believing that the sentinel had returned to his post by this time. And he was not mistaken. When he had gone about as far as the point where he had been encountered before, and was moving as silently as a shadow might move, he suddenly found that he was right abreast of the man.

He heard him breathing, but could not see him, and fairly held his own breath lest he be heard in turn.

With the utmost caution he stepped on, and

presently had the satisfaction of having passed the point of danger scot free.

But greater danger lay ahead, and he knew that he was like a rat in a trap. Once let him be discovered and overcome, and it was all up with him. He would never get out of there alive to disclose the secret he had discovered.

Had it not been for the fact of the girl prisoners, whom he knew to be there, what would have been easier than for him to have returned to Raspberry for help, and made a clean sweep upon the outlaw den and taken every man of them! But that was out of the question yet, and the main thing in order was the rescue of the young ladies if possible.

When he regained the place where a view was had of the cave, the scene there had changed slightly. The men were out of sight, and the horses were tethered along the wall at the right.

The fire was burning less brightly than before. Beyond the fire were two openings, one smaller than the other, and the smaller one having a blanket hung over it, partly closing it.

Stillwood took his bearings carefully. He wanted to advance and explore this den, but he must use every degree of caution in doing so.

While he stood there, watching, and reflecting how to proceed, an old woman emerged from the larger of the mentioned openings and entered the smaller one, carrying a pail of water.

As she drew aside the blanket to enter, the sheriff saw that a light was burning within, and he had a brief glimpse of two females seated on a rude bench at the further end of the rock chamber.

"Hal there, they are!" he exclaimed under his breath, "and now to rescue them. It must be done, even at the cost of my life. I will set them free!"

After a brief time the old woman came out again, carrying dishes, and disappeared in the larger chamber.

In that chamber there was a turn, and it seemed to bend around behind the one the fair prisoners were in. Stillwood could see nothing that was going on in it from the place where he stood, and the entrance had enough shadows to invite him to dare venture into it.

He resolved to do so.

Being satisfied that there was no one in the outer court of the cavern, he stole in, passed around the more shadowy side, and came to the larger opening. There he stopped to listen.

From within came the sounds of men's voices, talking and laughing, but he was not near enough to distinguish words.

When he had had time to take in his surroundings thoroughly, he saw that in the bend of the chamber was a niche that was in the deepest shadow that was to be seen anywhere. From that point, he believed, he would be able to see and hear everything.

But the danger lay in gaining that point. He would have to pass one of the lightest parts of the hall, if it may be so called, and that would be at the risk of being seen.

He was learning nothing where he was, though, and he resolved to take the risk.

Revolver in hand, he advanced, and fortune favoring him, he was soon in the coveted place.

He was not disappointed. He commanded a full view of the inner chamber, a big cave, lighted by a blazing fire at the further end. And there, standing before the fire, was the outlaw, Night-time Nigel!

Stillwood had to look at him. Was it possible that two persons could be so greatly alike as this man and the one he knew to be a prisoner in the jail? It seemed altogether beyond reason, but so it was. This man was Nigel, the Outlaw; the other was—who?

Nor was this all. Seated around him were seven others, two of whom were Lance Guydon and Ulysses Burbank. And beside them, there were the two men who had brought the prisoner to Raspberry, declaring him to be the outlaw. Their advance courier of that occasion was not to be seen. It was probably he that was on guard. It was certain that he had not been killed in the recent fight.

"Yes, we got a bad dose that time," the outlaw was saying, "and it has about broke my power for the time being. I was lucky not to get killed."

"You certainly were," agreed Guydon.

"And you say that accursed sheriff escaped as fortunately?"

"Yes, but he was just as lucky."

"Curse him! How I would like to have him in my power! I'll bet he would wish he had never been born."

Little dreamed he that Sheriff Stillwood was so near.

"You may be able to get him yet," said Burbank.

"I cannot hope to do much now, till I get more men at my back. Curse it! but it was bad not to get that bullion, after it was planned so nicely."

"Oh! that bullion is all right!" exclaimed Guydon. "We have put it where it can be found at another time. It is right under the northwest corner of old Josh's barn."

"The deuce it is! We will have it out of there, then, at the first chance. By the way, how about Nero?"

"Oh! he is in the jug, and is believed to be you."

"Good! Ha, ha, ha! That was a good joke, sending my dumb brother to them, and getting the reward that was offered for myself!"

"It might have been good, if you had got all the rewards, but you only got one. No matter, though, the joke is worth it all."

"And what about the murder? Have they found out anything more?"

"No. It looks bad for Oakbough. Those notices of yours, by the way, made a sensation. What have you to do with the matter? Why are you interested in it?"

"That remains to be seen. I will disclose it when the murderer is found. The murderer of that woman shall die by my hand—I swear it!"

"When you have found out who he is. That is the first thing in order."

"That is likely to be learned sooner or later. If I could only work openly I would soon know, but I can't. I must depend on others. What did the sheriff think of that visit I made him?"

This was news, and gave much matter for talk and jest during the next half-hour.

Stillwood remained as motionless as a statue, taking in everything, and storing the points away for future reference.

His inning would soon come, now.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RASCALLY SCHEMERS FOILED.

SHERIFF STILLWOOD was eager to learn every point he could.

The more he could get hold of, the more completely the game would be in his own hands.

But there presently came a point beyond which he did not dare delay longer about making an effort to rescue the prisoners.

From the conversation, he learned the evil design that had brought the two rascals there on such a night. They intended to go through with a mock ceremony of marriage, forcing the helpless girls to become their wives, legally or otherwise.

Stillwood's blood boiled. He felt like shooting them where they sat, but he did not. It would be too much like murder in cold blood, to suit him. But he would see to it that they did not escape the law. Then, too, he was alone, and they were eight or more against him.

He had been in hiding about half an hour, and during that time those in the cave had been drinking freely, including the old woman who seemed to hold the post of cook and mother of the brood in general.

She was beginning to show signs of being sleepy, and was nodding in her place before the fire.

Knowing that he must act, as said, Stillwood watched for the best chance to leave his place of hiding and pass the belt of light that lay between him and the other friendly shadows.

A chance soon came, and taking advantage of it, he leaped out, silently, and speedily made his way to the entrance. There he paused, looked around with caution, and seeing no one, slipped out and was soon behind the blanket that hung over the entrance to the adjoining chamber.

When he entered he found the girls upon their knees in the attitude of praying.

Uttering a low "hiss" and holding up a finger as a further caution to silence, he advanced quickly toward them.

Their faces were immediately lighted with glad hope.

A hasty glance showed their rescuer that their hands were tied behind them, and that they were tied to the walls in addition.

His knife soon set them free and then he whispered:

"Do not speak! Do not ask a question or say a word! Your only hope is in immediate flight. Even in that there is danger, but it is the only way. Come, follow me, silently as shadows."

He turned and started out, they after him, and after a brief pause at the opening, to make sure that the men from the other cavern were not yet coming, he started and ran lightly but swiftly across the outer court to the tunnel that led out into the narrow passage that led to the river.

The girls were right at his heels.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, fervently, when they were safe in the short tunnel, "you are safe so far. But the danger is not past yet, for there is a sentinel ahead to be disposed of."

"And how will you dispose of him?" asked Imogene, trembling.

"By the knife, if necessary. One life, nor a dozen, shall balk us now. You follow me until you feel me stop, for we can see nothing ahead here, and there stop till I go ahead as far as the guard is. Then I will either call you or come back for you."

"All right; we understand."

They moved on till the end of the tunnel was reached, where the sheriff stopped and held the girls back with his hand. Then he moved on alone, as silently as it was possible to move.

He soon made a discovery, however, and stopped. The guard was snoring at a high pitch, and was clearly fast asleep.

Stillwood went quickly back for the girls, brought them forward, and in less than a minute, with using great care, they had passed

the sleeping sentinel, and were speeding out of the den.

But they were far from being "out of the woods." Discovery was likely to happen at any moment of their absence, when the outlaws would be after them hot-foot. No delay must be made whatever.

As soon as they were out, Stillwood bade them remain at the mouth of the fissure till he procured his horse, which he soon did, and rejoined them.

They joined hands, then, and proceeded up the narrow bar of sand until the rock wall forced them into the water.

"Now," said Stillwood, as they stopped, "comes the danger and the test of your courage. Can either of you swim?"

"I can," answered Imogene, promptly.

"But not I," added Rhoda.

"It is fortunate that one of you can," commented Stillwood. "Only one can ride the horse, and I and the other must hold fast to the saddle and swim with him, or, at any rate, hold on in that way."

"I can do it, and will," declared Imogene, firmly.

"Then, as there is no time to be lost, let us be active. Miss Oakbough, let me help you into the saddle."

Rhoda was trembling at the danger, but there was no other way, and she had to take the risks. To drown in the river, in trying to escape, was preferable to remaining there to meet a worse fate.

She was soon in the saddle, and then, Imogene holding on by her right hand to one side of the noble animal, and Stillwood to the other, they took the chilling plunge and struck out for the opposite shore.

Rhoda guided the horse, and under the sheriff's encouraging but low-spoken words of urging, the noble animal struck out boldly.

It was still storming furiously, but, that was not noticed.

"Can you bear up, Imogene?" Stillwood presently asked.

"Yes, I am all right," was the answer. "Do not have any concern about me."

"Do not let go, whatever you do. If the horse only holds out, we are safe. We are half-way across now, or more."

"Then we shall reach the other side all right."

But the horse began to show signs of having too great a burden to bear, and the sheriff had the gravest fear that he would not hold out. He let go his own hold, only retaining his place by his own efforts, and encouraged the animal all he could.

Had the river been half as wide again, or the current only a little stronger, or any one of a dozen other things that could be mentioned had opposed, then they would never have reached the other shore; but the river, the current, and the dozen other things were just as they were, and they did reach the bank safely, though Stillwood, Imogene, and the horse were about exhausted.

They had come out at a point below the trail, of course, and even lower down than the entrance to the outlaw den, but now they were safe.

Stopping right there to rest, before making any further efforts, they took plenty of time about it, and when they started on they felt greatly refreshed.

Some difficulty was experienced in finding the trail, owing to the brush and rocks, but it was discovered at last, and Stillwood exclaimed:

"There! now we shall experience but little more trouble, compared with that which we have had. You ladies must ride, and I will walk ahead and lead the horse."

"I can walk as well as not, a part of the way at least," declared Imogene.

"No, you had better ride, both of you," the sheriff persisted.

"Well, just as you think best," they both agreed.

He helped them up on the horse, and when they had settled themselves in as comfortable positions as they could assume, under the circumstances, they set out for home.

As they went along they talked, and Stillwood told all about how he had found them, and they on their part told all about their adventure.

On the night of their disappearance, Rhoda had received a note, purporting to be from Imogene, requesting her to meet her at a certain place at nine. Without suspecting anything wrong, she went to the place named, where she was seized, bound, and carried out of the town, her captors going far out and around in order not to be seen.

And the story told by Imogene was about the same. Neither knew that the other was a prisoner till they were both put in the same cave-chamber when their destination was reached.

They had been treated with rude kindness by the old woman who had the keeping of them, and had met with no harm further than a bad fright and much anxiety.

When they neared Raspberry, some time after midnight, Stillwood observed:

"I do not want it known yet that I rescued you."

"Why?" they asked.

"Because I do not want the outlaws to learn that I know where their den is. We have made the escape in such a manner that they can never know how you got away, and it will be well to let them think you made your own escape."

"Very well, we will not mention it, if you desire."

"And I do. When we enter the town I will help you to dismount, and you can go alone to your homes. You will be safe, once in the town, for we know where your enemies are now."

So it was arranged, and so it was carried out. In the mean time, barely half an hour had they been gone from the cave of the outlaw band when their escape was discovered.

The old woman was roused up and sent in to bring the two prisoners into the larger room, and she set out to obey, but soon returned in a fright, crying:

"They're gone! They're gone!"

Consternation followed immediately. The men sprung up and rushed out and into the chamber where the girls had been, and sure enough they were missing.

"A thousand curses!" cried Guydon, "how has this happened?"

"I don't know," declared the woman. "They were both there, and fastened, too, the last time that I was in here."

"I believe you lie!" cried Nigel. "I believe you let them go! They have won you over with a bribe."

"No, on my soul I didn't," was the earnest denial.

"Then tell us how they did get away."

"I don't know. Some one must have kem beur and took 'em out, that's all I kin say."

"And I know better than that," Nigel stormed. "I'll soon see, though," and he snatched a brand out of the fire and entered the tunnel to find the sentinel.

The loud talking, for the remarks were in no gentle tones, had reached the ears of the outlaw in the narrow passage, and when the chief of the band appeared he was ready to receive him.

"Has any one passed in or out this way?" was the demand.

"Nary a one," was the prompt answer. And to that the sentinel stuck.

The hour that followed was exciting. Nothing was to be found of the missing prisoners, and all that was known about their escape was that their bonds had been cut with a keen knife. It was a baffling mystery.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FORCING A CONFESSION.

It was after midnight, on this same stormy night, that two forms again stole to the rear of the Oakbough residence.

One was that of a man and the other that of a woman, as before, and both were well protected from the storm in rubber over-garments.

The man opened the rear door, as he had done on the other occasion, and this time they both went in, closing the door after them. And once within, they passed into the kitchen, and there laid off their rubber coats.

The woman was attired as Mrs. Oakbough, the murdered woman, and was the same person who had called upon Mr. Oakbough at the jail, and whose identity Sheriff Stillwood had learned.

A veil was over her face, and the man wore a half-mask.

No words were spoken, and it was evident that they had their plans all laid and well understood.

The man had a bull's-eye lantern in hand, and by its light they were enabled to look about them and guide themselves.

When they were both ready to leave the room the man turned off the light and silently opened the door, and they were about to pass out when they caught a glimmer of light above and heard a cautious footstep.

For an instant they paused, until they had made sure that some one was coming down, when they hastily drew back and closed the door.

"Some one is coming," the man whispered. "We must hide. Here, take the coats, and we'll step into this recess behind the closet."

It took but a moment to do this, and when a few seconds later, a woman entered the kitchen, bearing a candle, she could not suspect that any one was there.

That woman was Joan Reytol.

She placed the candle on the table, and turned to the stove.

Her face was slightly pale, but had withal an expression of determination, as though she had some desperate work to do.

Moving with the utmost caution in order not to make a noise, she removed a lid of the stove, put in some paper, a few light sticks, and then stepped into the adjoining wash-room and returned with a can of kerosene.

She poured some of the oil on the paper and wood, and carried the can out again.

From the place where the two persons were in hiding, a view was had of the other room through the open door, and by the light of the candle the woman was seen to step to the wood-

box and carefully remove the wood from one end.

When some of the wood had been removed, she put in her hand, as though to find something, but drew it out again immediately with a start.

What she was looking for was not there!

In haste she sprung out into the kitchen for the candle, and returned and began to make her search a thorough one. Now her face was ashy, and her breathing was in panting gasps.

The man and woman who were in hiding looked on with interest, and now the man gave the woman a gentle push and motioned her to step out.

The woman obeyed, and crossed silently to the door of the wash-room, where she stood in solemn silence. Any one who had known the dead Mrs. Oakbough, would take this to be she.

Joan Reytol searched the wood-box desperately.

"Where is it?" she gasped. "I know I put it here!"

She stood back and gazed at the box with an expression of horror, her eyes wildly dilated and her hands trembling.

The woman in the door did not move.

Presently Joan looked in her direction, perhaps having caught a glimpse of a form standing there, and the moment she did so she uttered a piercing shriek that rung through the house.

The woman slowly raised her right arm, and her fingers pointed at the trembling being before her.

Joan reeled back until the wall stopped her, and there she stood, her mouth half open, the candle almost dropping from her hand, and her whole manner betraying the most horrible fear.

"Murderess, tremble!"

So spoke the woman in the door, in a hollow tone.

With a groan Joan Reytol sunk to the floor, limp as a rag, and the candle fell from her nerveless fingers.

As it happened, the light did not go out, and the candle stood upright in its tin holder.

"Mercy! Mercy! Have mercy on me!" the miserable wretch gasped, as she fairly writhed in her mental torture.

Was further proof needed that Joan Reytol was the guilty one? The apron that this strange woman had found was hers, and now she had been caught in the act of preparing to destroy it.

"You had no mercy on me," was the solemn and slow-spoken response from the woman in the door, whose accusing finger still pointed at the cowering being.

"I did not do it! I did not kill you! Oh! have mercy on me!"

"You did murder me, Joan Reytol, and I intend to haunt you to the hour of your death."

"No! I did not, I did not!"

"Did not I see you? Did not I open my eyes when you had plunged the cruel knife into my breast? Did not your hand prevent me from screaming? Your apron was covered with my life-blood, and you brought it here and hid it in the wood-box. You are here now to burn it. But, that apron is gone, and it will bring you to death upon the gallows, as you deserve."

"Oh! spare me, spare me!"

"Did you spare me? Was there any mercy in your heart when you thrust that knife into my body?"

"Oh! I was mad, mad! I knew not what I did! Be merciful to me, and let me go away."

"You were mad, were you? It did not look so. Were you mad when you laid every possible plan to throw suspicion upon my poor husband?"

The woman was pretending that she was a spirit, the ghost of the murdered woman, as is readily understood, of course.

"Oh! spare me, spare me! Do not haunt me, and I will confess and set him free!"

"When you have done that, then I will cease to haunt you, but not until then. Night and day, asleep and awake, my form shall stand before you as you see it now. How will you like that? Confess, confess everything, and I will trouble you no more."

"I will! Oh! I will do anything!"

"Why did you kill me, then?"

"Because I hated you."

"And why did you hate me? What had I ever done to you? Was I not kind and generous to you always?"

"And I hated you for it, and—and I hated you because you had taken the place that once was mine!"

"The place that once was yours— I do not understand you."

"With your pretty face and winning ways you took Mr. Oakbough's love from me, and he threw me off for you. I swore that I would have your life for it, and I have."

"But, explain. You must make a full confession, or I will haunt you as I have vowed. Who and what are you?"

That raised right arm and the accusing finger never moved, but pointed steadily at the cowering wretch.

"My true name is Joanna Lotver," the woman confessed. "I loved Byron Oakbough, and lived with him several years in Chicago,

though not married to him! What cared I for the form, so long as I had his love? Of course I was not acknowledged his wife, but I held a wife's place, and that was enough for me. His children were East, where he had come from, and of course knew nothing about me, as it was not to be supposed that he would tell them of his new-found love.

"But the end to my dream came when your pretty face appeared. Mr. Oakbough courted and married you, and with you and his son and daughter came West, and I was forgotten. I had not known him under that name, but I tracked him until at last I discovered him here, with you. I entered the house as a servant, with the determination in my heart of having revenge. I meant to kill you and so fasten the crime upon him that he would be hanged for the deed."

"You know how near I have come to carrying out my scheme, and only for my foolishness in not destroying that apron before this, I would escape and he would suffer for—"

The woman in the doorway laughed a low and mocking laugh.

"Do not think that," she interrupted, "for I would haunt you to your grave, whether the world knew your secret or not. You would never know peace in life, nor would you find peace in death. My haunting spirit would follow you through all the ages of the vast eternity. Even death would not save your soul from the blot of blood you have put upon it, for death would not kill your soul, but only your body. Oh! you may tremble, but that will not help your situation. You—"

"Oh! mercy! mercy! Spare me, spare me! You promised that you would not haunt me if I would confess."

"I will not forget my promise. Go on and confess all. Tell how you did the crime, and all about it."

There were two witnesses to her words. The other, besides the man in hiding behind the closet, was Francis Oakbough. The scream had awakened him, and he had come down to learn what it meant. He stood just outside the kitchen door, taking in all that was said.

"I had made my plans to kill the woman that week, on the morning when Mr. Oakbough should take his usual bath. I watched for him, and when he left the room on that morning, and had been in the bath-room long enough to be in the tub, then I stole into the bed-room, and finding the knife I wanted, plunged it into your heart. You opened your eyes, as you have said, and would have screamed had I not stopped your mouth. In the brief struggle I dragged you from the bed and left you on the floor, where you died. Oh! but it was sweet revenge!"

"As soon as I dared remove my hand from your mouth, I put the sleeve of Mr. Oakbough's coat into the blood, to make a point against him, and then taking some more blood on my apron, went out of the room and hid myself in the closet at the end of the hall. After Mr. Oakbough had made the discovery, and had rushed from the room, I made haste to put a trail of blood from the bed-room door to the door of the bath-room, and in the bath-room, dropping it from the wet apron I carried, and then I hastened away and hid the apron in the wood-box and washed my hands. All the rest that took place is known to everybody, and of course is known to you, for—"

"Yes, it is well known to me," interrupted the woman, throwing up her veil and presenting a revolver, "and you, murderess, are my prisoner. Make one move to escape, and I will kill you in your tracks!"

The strange woman was Ysult, the Queen of Sheba!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NIGHT-TIME NIGEL NABBED.

JOAN REYTOL had sprung to her feet. Mad, wild curses were upon her lips, and found utterance.

During the recital of her forced confession she had grown slightly calm.

That is to say, calm as compared with the first fear and trembling that had seized her upon beholding the supposed ghost.

Now that she saw she was trapped, she broke forth in a storm of fury. What if she had let out the truth? No one had heard it save this strange woman, and she could not prove it.

In a moment her manner changed to desperate bravado.

"Ha, ha, ha!" she laughed, "you played a great trick, but little good will it do you. You cannot prove what I have told you, and it was all a lie, anyhow. I am not afraid of you, so do your worst. My word will be as good as yours. Who are you, anyhow? If you don't look out the crime may be shifted off onto you."

But even as she finished speaking another form appeared in the door, and her face took on an expression as of death.

Now she saw that she was indeed trapped, and that she would have to answer for the crime she had done.

The other form that faced her was that of a man.

It was he who had accompanied the woman

into the house, and now that his mask was removed his identity was discovered, and Joan recognized him.

It was Ward Wyman, the detective.

And right behind him appeared Francis Oakbough.

"There are witnesses enough to what you have confessed, murderess," said the latter, grimly.

Ward Wyman advanced and quickly snapped a pair of handcuffs upon her wrists.

Just then was heard a loud knock at the front door.

"Who can that be?" the detective questioned.

"I will go and see," said Francis, and he started.

"Are you armed?" asked Wyman.

"Yes," was the response, and Francis displayed a revolver that was in his hand.

"Good enough. No knowing what danger may meet you when you open the door. It will pay to be prepared."

The loud knock was repeated, and Francis hurried out and to the door.

On opening it he was amazed to see his sister there on the steps, and she made haste to get in out of the storm, though wet through as she was it could do little further harm.

"Where have you been?" was the eager demand.

"In the hands of the outlaws," was the answer. "I will tell you about it after I have changed my clothes. Will you call Joan and ask her to bring a change of clothing to the kitchen and light a fire—"

"Joan is under arrest for the murder," Francis broke in.

"What?" cried Rhoda, "Joan Reytol the murderess?"

"Yes, and she has confessed. She has just been arrested, and is in the kitchen now."

"Heaven be praised that father is indeed innocent!" was the girl's fervent exclamation.

They proceeded immediately to the kitchen, where explanations followed, all around.

Leaving the prisoner there for the time being, in charge of Francis Oakbough, or perhaps more in charge of Ysult, the card queen, the detective put on his rubber coat and set out to find the sheriff.

Rhoda had not told that she had been rescued by him, and so the detective naturally expected that he would find him at the jail.

He went there and inquired.

No, the sheriff was not there. He had gone out of town in the evening, Joe Russel explained, and might be back at any moment or not until morning. He could not tell.

Dan Horton was in the office, however, and he was called out and the case was made known to him.

"We'll give her lodging here, you bet we will!" he exclaimed. "There is a cell here that is hungry for her."

"Very well, come with me and get her, then," said Wyman.

They set out, and ere long returned to the jail with the prisoner in charge, and there they now found the sheriff.

"What is this I hear?" he inquired, eagerly; "the right one found at last?"

"Yes, the guilty one is in our hands, and this is she."

Joan was taken in and locked up, and the guard around the jail was cautioned to perform well the duty that rested upon them.

As it was so late, and Mr. Oakbough was probably asleep, it was thought best to leave him there till morning.

On the return from the outlaw den the sheriff's thoughts had been busy, and he had been turning over the various points of the game in mind. He thought that it was not at all unlikely that the outlaw would come to Raspberry that same night and get the treasure in bullion that was hidden under the barn.

Finding the girls missing, he reasoned, he would conclude that they had had help to get away, and that his retreat was now discovered. Would he not make haste to get out of danger? And would he leave behind so big a sum as the bullion represented, knowing where it was?

The sheriff, the detective, the deputy, and some of the other men held a brief conference in the jail office, and it was decided that it would be a good idea to watch for the outlaw, anyhow.

If he did come, they would have him. If not, no one else could steal the treasure from its hiding-place.

Accordingly, the sheriff took half a dozen of his men and went to the sheds behind the hotel to spend the remainder of the night.

In the mean time Lance Guydon and Ulysses Burbank had set out to return from the outlaw cave.

They wanted to be in Raspberry before morning.

If their names were mixed up in the story the girls would tell, they wanted to be able to say that they had not been out of town.

Not that they looked for exposure, for, as it happened, the girls had made their escape before the rascally scheme had been made known to them. If there was anything known, it would be to the person who had rescued them, whoever it might be.

And only a short time after their departure

the outlaw resolved upon the very plan that Stillwood had considered likely.

He called his men together, explained the situation to them, and it was decided that they should go at once and get the bullion, and make good their escape to a new quarter, where they could regain their lost strength and prepare for further deeds of outlawry.

It was two o'clock, or perhaps later, when Lance Guydon and Burbank rode silently into town, put away their horses, and quietly sought their respective beds. And a little later a spy informed Stillwood of their arrival.

Another hour passed.

At the end of that time another spy, or perhaps the same one, came to the sheriff to report that several horsemen had just entered the valley silently from the west, and had dismounted above the town.

This put the men in a state of eager expectation, and they all looked well to their weapons. The storm was still raging, and the darkness was intense.

Finally a slight noise was heard in the yard, and it was followed by the careful tread of men in the direction of the shed.

Stillwood and his men were ready, the sheriff having his lantern under his coat and ready to flash its light upon the scene at the proper moment.

The steps came nearer. They were heard under the shed. They were heard at the corner of the barn, and then followed some talk in whispers.

Sheriff Stillwood gave a low chirp, like a cricket, and that was a signal for his men to advance, silently, and have their weapons ready. And they did, making not a sound that could be heard above the noise of the storm. They were still more cautious than the others had been.

Another chirp from the sheriff, and then his light flashed upon the scene.

It revealed Night-time Nigel and three of his men, in the act of feeling under the corner of the barn for the stolen bullion.

They sprang to their feet in alarm, and the voice of the sheriff rung out clear and sharp.

"Hands up!" he ordered, "or you die in your tracks!"

"Never!" cried Nigel, and he made a move to get his weapons, but he quickly changed his mind.

The six gleaming revolvers that stared at them, in the hands of the sheriff and the men, overawed them, and their hands went up.

The light was full upon them, the revolvers were right in their faces, and to resist would be death sure and soon.

"Curse you!" Nigel grated, "you have got me this time!"

"And I mean to take care of you, too," Stillwood responded.

"See that you do, for if you don't I will take care of you."

"I'll take the risks."

Two of the sheriff's men had dropped their revolvers into their belts, now, and proceeded to disarm the prisoners and bind their hands securely.

And when that was done they were led away to the jail.

The box of bullion, too, was taken there and put in a safe place.

When morning came, and the news was made known, the citizens of Raspberry shouted themselves hoarse.

They could not cheer loud enough to do justice to the occasion. The sheriff was the hero of the hour, and even "Bull" Garry could not find room for complaint, except that he still shouted for lynching the outlaws without delay.

The "Regulator of Raspberry" was upon every lip, and even Stillwood's political opponents had to acknowledge that such a title was rightfully his.

But, the excitement did not stop there, for there was more to follow.

Along in the forenoon warrants were got out for the arrest of Lance Guydon, Ulysses Burbank, and some others, and these, with the five outlaws—the one who had been left with the horses had been taken, too, as we forgot to mention;—with these, it was quite a victory.

The outlaw band was entirely broken.

Nor did it stop there, either, for later on the detective got out yet another warrant for the arrest of the elder Guydon.

Verily, Raspberry was witnessing some wholesome regulating at last.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DESPERATE DEEDS DONE.

OF course Mr. Oakbough had been released from custody.

Now that his innocence was established, everybody felt the greatest sympathy for him, and it would have required only a nod of assent from Stillwood to have lynched the true assassin.

Rhoda Oakbough now owned that she was innocent, and gave as her reason for declaring that she was guilty, her fear of her father's danger—if not, in truth, his own guilt.

She had heard the quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. Oakbough, and her father's threat, and feared that he was indeed guilty.

Mr. Oakbough would not tell the cause of that quarrel, saying he preferred to have it remain

unknown, if possible, now that it could make no difference in the matter.

But it was destined yet to be revealed, and that sooner than was looked for.

About the most startling revelation was that in which the "Queen of Sheba" and her darky servant were concerned. She was a famous female detective of San Francisco, and the darky was none other than Ward Wyman. The two were man and wife.

As the trials were to come off in a few days, they remained to give testimony against the rascals.

The plan they had carried out had been the one agreed upon even before their coming to Raspberry.

It was a game they had played before, and with success.

What puzzled the citizens sorely was to learn what the elder Guydon had been arrested for.

It was not believed that he had had any hand in the robberies, and in fact the guilty ones declared that he had not, but there was something against him, and that of a serious nature.

That, too, was yet to come to light.

The forenoon passed, the excitement began to cool down, the storm cleared away, and everything began to assume its usual course.

At the jail a strong guard was kept posted, and a special watchman was stationed at the door of Night-time Nigel's cell.

No possible chance was going to be allowed him for escape.

All the men about the jail had been warned of his mesmeric power, and all were strictly ordered not to give him a chance to work it upon them.

And yet, in spite of that warning, it was that very power that was to give him his liberty. And that, too, before the day was done. It would not have been considered possible, but the fact remained to be shown.

The man on duty at the cell door was one Ned Todd.

He was a big, strong fellow, a fine revolver shot, and full of "sand." It must be a good man who could overcome him in a fair fight.

The outlaw proceeded to be friendly with him from the first.

Nigel proved to be a dare-devil indeed, one who seemed to care nothing for his life, and now that his race was run he evidently meant to die "game."

But he had a deeper purpose, and that was, to escape.

And he had another, too, that will be shown as we proceed to the end of the present chapter.

The outlaw showed special interest in the murder case, and questioned his guardsmen closely until he had got all that Todd could give. He seemed especially interested to know the real murderer had been arrested, and pressed to know the proof that was against her.

Of course Todd knew what that proof was, for it was known to everybody, and he gave the outlaw everything he could.

In return, the outlaw told him the particulars of many of his most daring exploits, which rivaled anything that has ever been laid to the discredit of the notorious James boys, and along in the afternoon Todd found himself listening to one of these stories, with his every thought hanging upon the words as they fell from the rascal's lips.

They were standing close to the grated door, one outside and the other inside, and although Todd knew all about the fellow's mesmeric power, he had allowed it to slip from his mind for the moment.

As Nigel talked his eyes were fixed upon his listener, and finally a change began to steal over Todd's face.

The story ended, and he stood there, as steady as a statue.

A smile of devilish cunning lit up the face of the outlaw, and making sure that his control of his subject was complete, he said, in a low tone:

"Unlock this door?"

Todd obeyed, without a moment's hesitation.

"Come in," was the next order.

This, too, was obeyed.

The prisoner closed the door, and then directed the mesmerized man to take off the handcuffs that were on his wrists.

Todd obeyed everything, and had soon placed himself in the prisoner's place.

Nigel had assumed his hat, coat and belt of weapons, while the guardsman had on the handcuffs.

"Ha!" the rascal muttered, "we will see how long they will keep Night-time Nigel in a trap like this. I shall be out in spite of them, and that within the hour. They cannot hold me!"

When he was ready he looked out to see if the way was clear.

It was, and he stepped out, locking the door after him. And that done, he stood before the door for some minutes, as though on guard, thinking he heard some one approaching.

One of the jailers came in, carried some water to one of the cells, and went out again.

He had seen the outlaw standing there, but had taken him to be Todd.

When the jailer was gone, Nigel proceeded to look for the cell that held the murderer.

It was not on that side of the building, and having satisfied himself upon that point, the outlaw let himself through a connecting door, and found himself on the women's side of the lock up.

The first cell he came to happened to be the one that held Joan Reytol, and unlocking the door of it he went in.

Joan looked at him in surprise, wondering who he could be and what he wanted, no doubt, and he said never a word, but proceeded to look straight into her eyes.

In a few moments she was in his power.

Taking the coarse sheet from the rude bunk, he tore it into strips, or tore some strips from it, more properly, and tying three or four of these together, made a noose in the rope thus formed, and put it over the woman's neck.

That done, he put the other ends through the grating at the top of the door, pulled the woman up clear of the floor, and tied her there.

He had hanged her!

And he did not stop at that. Taking paper and pencil from his pocket, he wrote something on a sheet of paper. When he had done he took Todd's knife from the belt he had taken from him, held the paper up against the woman's breast, and drawing back with the knife he plunged its blade through the paper and to the very hilt in the woman's heart!

It was an atrocious deed, but after it was done the hardened villain looked upon his work with a smile.

"That is my revenge," he muttered.

He stepped out, locked the door of the cell, and passed coolly along the passage.

When he came to the door at the end of it, he stopped to listen. Hearing no one, he unlocked it and went through.

Just as he had closed the door behind him he came face to face with another of the guardsmen.

Their eyes met, and in a flash the outlaw saw that he was recognized.

Like a tiger he sprang upon the man, before he could utter a cry of alarm or draw a weapon, and bore him to the floor. And there, by main force of superior strength, he held him till he ceased to live.

"And so I will serve them all!" the murderer hissed. "Nothing shall stand between me and my liberty!"

But he was not yet out. He had still the main corridor to cross, and the outer door to pass.

He looked well to the revolvers he had captured, and making sure that they were easily at his command, he opened the door and stepped into the corridor.

Here he was favored by the semi-darkness of the place.

Two men were on guard there, and they looked at him keenly.

"Is Stillwood in the office?" he promptly asked.

"No," one of them responded, "he went up th' street a short while ago."

"Then I'll go and find him. Th' woman prisoner is sick."

"What's th' matter with her?" was asked.

"She's fainted, I reckon. Think she needs a doctor. Jest keep a little extra watch till I get back, will ye?"

While talking, the outlaw had moved to the door, and he now opened it and stepped boldly out and started in the direction of the hotel.

The watchmen and others around looked after him, but allowed him to go without challenge. He was seen to be armed, and as he had his hat pulled slightly down, they evidently took him to be Todd.

When he reached the hotel he found a horse tied to a post in front, saddled, and coolly untying the animal, he leaped into the saddle and cantered out of the valley to the west.

It was one of the most bold and daring escapes ever known.

Barely ten minutes had he been gone from the jail when the discovery of his escape was made.

Todd had recovered from the effect of the spell under which he had been put, and began to bellow lustily for help.

The guardsmen rushed in, and as soon as they saw the fix their fellow-guard was in, they guessed the truth. He had been mesmerized, and the outlaw was gone.

The alarm was given immediately, and the whole town was soon in an uproar.

Stillwood rushed to the jail to learn the particulars, and just as he arrived there the body of the murdered guardsman had been found, and a little later on the fact was revealed that the female prisoner had been murdered.

The sheriff was called to her cell in all haste, and at sight of the outlaw's heinous work his blood seemed to chill.

Taking the paper from the knife that was buried in her breast, he read it.

It was as follows:

"NOTICE!

"I told the murderer of Marion Oakbough to tremble. Behold the manner of revenge I have wrought upon the assassin! This blow avenges the death of a sister much loved, but who, perhaps, never revealed the fact that her brother was

"NIGEL, THE OUTLAW."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HAND TO HAND WITH NIGEL.

IF other events had raised excitement, what can be said of this?

Now the climax was capped. The town let itself loose. Everybody was out in the streets, and everybody was wild.

"What did I tell yer?" yelled Mr. "Bull" Garry. "Didn't I opine that th' cuss would git away, if he wasn't hung right up? Why didn't th' sher'f take my advice, and practice a leetle lynch-law on him? Oh! this is what comes o' puttin' a dude inter office."

"Whar, oh! whar is th' dude sher-ref?"

Whar, oh! whar is he?

Buttin' his brains out 'g'in' th' jail wall,

Is whar he orter be!"

And the rowdy element of the crowd joined with him.

With hasty instructions to his deputy, Stillwood was soon mounted and in hot pursuit of the outlaw, and alone.

He was armed to the teeth, having his rifle as well as a brace of revolvers, and meant to recover his prisoner, dead or alive.

The sheriff believed that the rascal would make straight for his den, where he must have treasure hidden, and securing that, would make all haste to get away from that part of the country.

Without paying any attention to the trail, he kept to the main road, intending to go direct to the cave, whether he saw the outlaw or not.

He put his horse to a good speed, and pushed right ahead, and nothing was seen of the man he was after till he reached Red Rock Canyon.

In the canyon, as he turned a bend in the road, he was suddenly checked by a bullet that whistled close to his head, and followed immediately by the report of a revolver.

Just ahead was the outlaw, riding hard to make his escape, the horse he had stolen being about tired out.

It had been about "played" when he had taken it.

Stillwood spurred after him, regardless of danger, and only bent upon retaking the desperate rascal.

Another bullet was sent to meet him, and this time it came even closer. It stung the skin on his left arm.

Now Stillwood fired, but his bullets were no more fatal, but that was owing, perhaps, to the fact that he did not want to kill the man, but take him alive.

By stopping and using his rifle, he could have cut his career short. And he realized that that was what he ought to do, but his daring spirit, and the great desire to get the fellow alive, urged him on.

Two or three more shots were fired, and at the last one the sheriff's noble horse trembled and dropped.

With a wild yell of exultation and defiance, then, the outlaw waved his hat and pushed on.

But he was not out of danger.

Stillwood sprang clear of the horse as it went down, and unslinging the rifle from his back he dropped upon his knee, took deliberate aim, and fired.

Down went the outlaw's horse.

The sheriff ran forward then, firing as he ran, now using his revolver again, and seeming to care nothing for the bullets that whistled around him. He was made of the right metal, and his "caliber" was of the biggest.

But he was reckless, too reckless, and he soon met with defeat, one of the bullets from the outlaw's revolvers hit his head, and down he went in the road. His head began to swim, all grew dark before his eyes, and he knew no more.

Seeing the effect of his shot, the outlaw laughed again, and with another wave of his hat, dashed on down the canyon.

Had Stillwood used his rifle, and fired to kill, it would have been different.

But the sheriff was not dead.

Finally he came to, and struggled to his feet. In a moment he remembered all about the fight, and pressed his hand to his head to learn how badly he was hurt. He found an ugly scalp wound, but the bone seemed to be all right.

Picking up his rifle, and reloading his revolvers, he started on.

The horses were both dead, and lay in the road where they had dropped.

How long a time had elapsed, Stillwood did not know, but judged it to have been not more than twenty minutes.

When the first effects of dizziness had passed, he began to recover his strength rapidly, and was soon able to increase his speed.

Still he did not attempt to follow any tracks, but was bent upon going to the outlaw's cave, where he was positive Nigel was headed for.

Having been over the ground, he knew the way thoroughly, and in due time he reached the banks of the Raspberry River. And he was just in time to see the man he was after, as he crept out of the water upon the bank at the foot of the rock wall on the other side, further down.

Stillwood dropped out of sight, and watched.

The man shook himself, after getting out of the river, and looked back. Now he evidently felt safe from pursuit for the time being.

He stood there for a little time, resting, and then walked down along the bar of sand and disappeared into the secret passage that led to the cave.

No sooner was the outlaw out of sight than Sheriff Stillwood prepared for the swim across the river. He meant to have his man, if it lay in his power to get him. Nothing but death should stop him now.

Removing his boots, he tied them and his rifle up in his coat, secured them to his back, and plunged in.

He was a good swimmer, and this little spurt would have given him no trouble had it not been for the pain he now had in his head, from the effect of the bullet.

Striking out with slow and steady stroke, one that he could keep up, he was soon well out into the stream and heading toward the point he desired to make, with every prospect of reaching there.

About the only thing he had to dread was that the outlaw might discover him before he got out of the river, and take his head for a target for rifle practice, for he had no doubt the fellow had rifles in his stronghold.

This did not occur, however, and the sheriff reached the other shore and pulled himself out upon the sandbar about as the outlaw had done.

When he had rested, he put on his boots and coat, and went forward and entered the cleft in the rock.

He proceeded with caution, his knife in hand as a ready "pass-word" for any challenge that might be given, but he met with none, and finally came out to the point where he could look into the big cavern.

A fire was burning on the floor, and he saw the old woman about it, as though engaged in preparing a meal.

Her presence he did not like, but he had no choice in the matter, and had to accept things as he found them.

Presently she entered the big chamber, and Stillwood sprang into the cavern and ran across and hid behind the blanket that hung over the entrance to the smaller one, as has been described.

While he stood there he heard voices in the other chamber, and could catch the loud-spoken words.

"Yes, old woman, I'm going to skip out," he heard the outlaw say.

"And where be ye goin?" the old crone asked.

"Oh! I don't know; anywhere that is a good distance off. I've got th' worst of it for this time, and I've got to make myself scarce."

"But, you'll take me with ye, won't ye?"

"Ha, ha, ha! What would I do with you? Besides, I've got no horse, till I can steal one, and you could never keep up with me on a walk."

"But I'll starve here, Nigel, and perish miserably, and—"

"Oh! that is what you are afraid of, is it? Well, I can save all that for you. You are about old enough to die, anyhow, and—"

There was the report of a pistol, a scream that ended in a groan, and a fall, and all was still.

Another murder had been done, and this, more than anything else, if possible, revealed to Stillwood the terrible character of the desperado he had to deal with.

That grim, stern expression settled upon his face, he looked well to his rifle and revolvers, and stepped out from behind the blanket and peered into the other chamber.

The outlaw was not to be seen, and he passed in, holding his rifle ready for instant use.

He reached the niche where he had been able to hide himself on the other occasion, and looked around into the further depths of the cavern.

There he saw the outlaw, just in the act of prying up a slab in the rocky floor.

Revolvers were in the fellow's belt, and a rifle was leaning against the wall only a few steps distant, but for the present he had no weapon in hand.

The old woman's body lay near the middle of the room, just where she had fallen.

Stillwood had the advantage, if he could only keep it, and his resolve to do that was firm enough.

Stepping boldly into the chamber, his step on the rocky floor caused the outlaw to look up and spring for his rifle, but before he could lay hands upon it the sheriff had called out:

"Stop! Throw up your hands!"

But the words had no effect. It was death one way or the other to the outlaw, and he was truly desperate now.

He grasped the rifle and wheeled around, and had it almost cocked when the weapon in the sheriff's hands made its voice heard, and the outlaw's right arm dropped powerless to his side.

"Surrender!" the sheriff cried, "or I'll give you more of the same!"

"Never!" was the defiant retort, and the fellow's left hand sought a revolver.

But Stillwood's right hand was quicker, and snatching a revolver from his belt he sent another bullet crashing through the flesh of the left arm.

This one did not break the bone, as the other had done, but it caused the weapon to drop, and

in the next moment Stillwood was upon the desperate man, and his capture was made certain.

He was speedily disarmed, and then Stillwood had no fear of his doing further mischief.

"How does it look now?" the sheriff asked.

"It is all up this time," was the gloomy response.

"Yes, it is all up, and your doom is certain. Will you allow me to attend to the wounds I had to inflict?"

"Yes, if you will do it. There's no more fight in me. You can do what you please with me, Stillwood; but cursed be the day that ever saw you elected sheriff of Raspberry county."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TRIALS AND EXECUTION.

STILLWOOD set about the work as gently as a woman might have done.

Bad as was the man with whom he had to deal, he was now helpless, wounded, and in his power.

The outlaw's right arm was shattered, between elbow and shoulder, and nothing could save it. It would have to come off.

His left arm had only a flesh wound, however, and that would heal, if it had time to do so before the day on his hanging came. That he would hang was now about certain, unless death came to his rescue.

When the sheriff had fixed him up as well as he could, he said:

"There, that is about all I can do for you, and we will be going. You will have to walk, unless you have horses around."

"And I haven't any."

"Who is this old woman whom you murdered?"

"She? Oh! she's only my mother."

Stillwood recoiled in horror.

"You are a very devil!" he exclaimed.

The outlaw laughed, and passed it off with a light remark.

"Well, she will have to lie where she is, till I come here again, with my men to get your treasure, and then we'll bury her."

"It don't matter; it's all th' same to her."

Stillwood had put a rope around the outlaw's neck, and he now led him from the cavern and along toward the river.

There was one thing that puzzled the sheriff, and that was—how to get his prisoner across the river. He had a vague plan in mind of making a raft, anything that would answer the purpose, and putting his man on that and swimming him over.

When he came out upon the bank of the stream, however, he found that that was unnecessary. Half a dozen of his men were just coming out of the water upon the sand-bar, mounted.

They greeted him heartily, and a cheer arose when they saw that he had the escaped prisoner.

Explanation showed that Deputy Dan had sent them out after him, thinking that he might need them.

Leaving the prisoner in keeping of one of the men, the sheriff led the others into the cavern, where they pried up the stone slab in the floor, and secured the booty the robber had stored away.

It was a big treasure, and made two good-sized packages when it was finally divided and wrapped in blankets that were found there.

That done, the body of the murdered woman was carried out to the sand-bar, where it was buried.

When all was ready, the outlaw was mounted upon a horse, and the sheriff took another that one of his men insisted upon his taking, and they swam the river and set out upon the return to Raspberry.

By this time night was closing down, and it was in the middle of the evening when they rode into the town.

It was Stillwood's purpose to get the prisoner quietly into the jail, before he made known that he had been retaken, but they were discovered when they were nearing that point, and the town let itself loose with a wild whoop.

A howling mob filled the street, and the cry for lynching seemed to be almost unanimous.

But Stillwood was firm in his purpose, and declared that the law should take its proper course.

Mr. "Bull" Garry was on hand, as usual, to voice his sentiments.

"Ther law be dang!" he bellowed. "Th' law ain't no good. All th' law that that cuss wants is about a dozen feet o' rope, an' that's what he'll git; hey, fellers? Let's take him an' string him up, anyhow!"

"The man who lays a hand on him will get a bullet!" declared the sheriff, in stern tones.

The crowd made way, and the rest of the distance to the jail was clear, and the prisoner was soon back again in his cell.

From that time till midnight the town set out to have a jubilee, and had it. Never had such an uproarious time been known. Everybody howled, and carried on as never before. It was a time of high carnival and an occasion of much

rejoicing. The outlaw band was disposed of, and now peace would reign supreme. Raspberry had in truth, found a Regulator in Sheriff John Stillwood!

When the Grand Jury met, short work was made of Nigel and his men.

They were sentenced to be hanged, and on the same day of their conviction, hanged they were.

Almost the whole county had poured into Raspberry to be present at the trial, but, as the courthouse would hold only a handful, comparatively but few heard the testimony; the hanging, however, which took place on the open flats above the place, was witnessed by at least five thousand persons.

And so ended a life of evil doing.

Some important facts had been brought out at the trial.

The outlaw's name was Nigel Montley. He had a dumb brother named Nero. It was he who had been brought in and passed off as the outlaw, and for whom a reward had been paid by the mining company.

It appeared that Nero had done something to displease his heartless brother, and Nigel had taken that means of disposing of him, and at the same time having revenge and playing a cute trick.

Nero was pardoned, and drifting away from Raspberry, was never seen again.

It came out, further, that Mrs. Oakbough, the murdered woman, had been a Miss Marion Montley—the outlaw's sister!

This was the cause of the quarrel between Mr. Oakbough and her. He had caught Nigel in the house one night, talking with her, and she had to own to the truth. On that occasion he had made the threat that if she ever made it known he would kill her.

Lance Guydon and Ulysses Burbank were found guilty of being in league with the outlaw, and both received long terms in State's prison.

Against the elder Guydon another charge was brought, and one that created a big surprise: he was charged with having stolen the fortune of one Joseph Clayport.

This charge was brought by the two detectives, and they had sufficient proof to sustain it.

The guilty man confessed. No need to set forth the particulars. Mrs. Clayport, the post-mistress, was the widow of this Joseph Clayport, and the fortune was restored to her.

Needless to say, she was only too glad that her daughter had not married Lancelot.

Lawrence Guydon, like his son, went to prison. The bandits' booty was restored to those from whom it had been taken, as far as possible. It was a great sum, and mended many a broken fortune in the county.

John Stillwood and his men received all the rewards that had been offered, and the sheriff divided the sum total exactly as he had promised to do, giving the relatives of those of his posse who had met death the share that would have fallen to them.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

MR. AND MRS. WYMAN, the detectives, were well paid for the services they had rendered, and returned to San Francisco.

Coming to Raspberry in the disguise they had assumed, it was impossible, almost, for any one to suspect who they were. Little did any one imagine that "Yselt, the Queen of Sheba," and her darky servant were detectives, and that it was for them to discover and arrest Mrs. Oakbough's murderer.

Byron Oakbough reassumed his position as president of the bank, or rather the duties, for he had never ceased to be president; and in time he got over the trouble that had come upon him.

His past had not been blameless, and he had only himself to blame, really, for his unhappy experience. Sin has a sting that, sooner or later, will be felt.

Francis Oakbough had to resign his position as cashier, in order to take his seat in the State Legislature, where he made his mark and is likely to rise to higher honors.

Rhoda married, and is well settled and happy.

There was soon a wedding in Raspberry. The happy couple were Sheriff Stillwood and Imogene Clayport.

That there was a big time on that occasion need not be said.

Even "Bull" Garry veered around and became the sheriff's friend.

Raspberry still flourishes, and many of the characters that have appeared in this story are still there. Among them may be mentioned, favorably, Joshua Hubbard, who still runs the "Seven Stars"; Giles Marsdon, Henry Rentlow and Martin Spangle.

Deputy Dan Horton must not be forgotten. He is a prime favorite.

And so we leave them, with John Stillwood holding the reins as sheriff, and still known as the "Regulator of Raspberry."

THE END.

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